

# SECRET SERVICE

OLD AND YOUNG KING BRADY, DETECTIVES.

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No. 189.

NEW YORK, SEPTEMBER 5, 1902.

Price 5 Cents.

## THE BRADYS IN THE OIL COUNTRY; OR, THE MYSTERY OF THE GIANT GUSHER.

*By A NEW-YORK DETECTIVE.*



From the undergrowth behind them sprang a dozen men. They surrounded the detectives. "We've got the fiends!" yelled Simpson, who was the leader of the party. "We'll make an example of them!" "Kill 'em! Hang 'em!" These were the fierce cries of the excited miners.



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## The Bradys in the Oil Country;

OR,

### THE MYSTERY OF THE GIANT GUSHER.

BY A NEW YORK DETECTIVE.

#### CHAPTER I.

##### THE MYSTERY.

A man stood before the door of an office in Broad Street in the city of New York one summer day.

He was a man tall and well formed, and his dress unmistakably stamped him a native of Texas.

The broad-brimmed hat, long coat and boots could not be mistaken; yet he was plainly a gentleman.

On the glass door of the office was painted a sign:

BURTON BRADCOMBE,  
Banker and Promoter.

The Texan glanced at the name. Then he opened the door and entered.

The office was apparently empty. No clerk was at the high desk. The Texan walked in as if familiar with the place.

The door to the private office beyond was closed.

The visitor glanced about, and then sank into a chair. He sat there for an hour.

Then he grew uneasy.

He arose and paced the floor, glancing impatiently at his watch.

"Queer," he muttered. "I wonder where Mr. Bradcombe? He was to meet me here."

Just then the door opened.

A little, shrewd-faced man with keen eyes entered.

He glanced at the Texan, and said:

"Beg pardon, can I do anything for you?"

"Yes," replied the Texan. "Tell me when Mr. Bradcombe will be in?"

"I am Mr. Bradcombe."

"Ah!" exclaimed the Texan, with a start. "I am glad. I have come a good ways to see you, sir."

With this the Texan tendered his card.

The banker glanced at it.

It read:

STANLEY SMALL, Beaumont, Texas,  
President Great Gusher Oil Company.

Mr. Bradcombe's manner changed. He became obsequious at once.

"Have a chair, Mr. Small," he said, politely. "I have long expected you. The pleasure and honor is great."

"Of course you know the purpose of my visit?" asked the Texan bluntly.

"From your letter I gather that you wish me to float the stock of the Great Gusher Oil Company in Wall Street."

"That is it exactly."

"Well, I am willing to talk with you. What is this Great Gusher?"

"The most valuable oil well in Beaumont," declared the Texan.



"Indeed!"

"It's capacity is unlimited."

"What development?"

"We have a tower, storehouses and a branch line of railroad. We are all ready for business."

"That is encouraging. What is your present capitalization?"

"About three millions."

Bradcombe looked interested. He shifted his seat.

"That is worth handling," he said. "It is surely an object."

"I felt sure you would regard it as such," said the Texan.

"I have come a long ways, and I should regret it much if I were compelled to return without doing business with you."

"You may be sure of doing business with me," said the banker, "at least on my regular terms of commission."

"What are they?"

The banker arose from his chair and looked about him. Then he said:

"Let us go into the private office. It is a better place to talk business."

The two men arose.

The banker placed his hand on the door knob and essayed to open the door.

To his surprise it would not open.

"What's this?" he exclaimed. "It is locked. Has that fool of a clerk done that?"

Then, with an exclamation, he picked up the key from the floor where it had dropped.

The banker inserted it in the lock and turned it.

Then he pushed in the door.

Right here begins our case of crime and mystery, the like of which is seldom told.

As Banker Bradcombe pushed open the door he essayed to step into the inner office; but he stopped short.

For one moment he stood transfixed, staring at an object on the floor. The Texan gasped with horror.

"My God! It is murder!"

"Murder?"

Both men stood for a full minute so overcome that they could not speak or act.

On the floor lay the object which had been the cause of their remarks.

It was the headless trunk of a man.

The interior of the room looked like a butcher's shambles. Blood covered the carpet, was splashed on the furniture, and was glued in clots to the wall.

The trunk was devoid of head and arms. The clothing had been slashed to ribbons by some instrument like a razor.

On the desk sat a ghastly object.

It was the severed head of the miserable victim.

The lifeless eyes stared at the two intruders. The tongue lolled between pallid lips.

The arms severed from the trunk were crossed on the desk before it.

Murder certainly had been done.

But by whom, and who was the victim? This was the awful question.

Bradcombe, sick and faint, leaned against the door jamb.

"Merciful powers!" he ejaculated. "Who has done this awful thing?"

The Texan, who seemed to have more nerve, stepped into the room.

He walked to an open window, which led out upon a fire escape.

"The murderer must have escaped here," he said.

"No," denied the banker; "that could not be."

"Why not?"

"The door was locked and the key left on the office floor. The assassin went out and locked the door behind him."

"No doubt you are right."

"He may have come in by the window."

"That is it."

"But—who is this victim? How did he come here?"

"That is the awful mystery."

"We must send for the police. This is a terrible affair."

The Texan had advanced and peered into the dead face. Then he looked at the hands.

Instantly he stiffened with a wild, hoarse, gurgling cry.

His face turned the color of ashes. He clutched at his throat and breathed like an animal at bay.

"Oh, my God!" he cried. "Joseph, my brother! It is my brother!"

Then he reeled back, and a cloud came before his vision. He sank half unconscious to the floor.

The banker in his frenzy rushed to the messenger call and rung for the police. Then he ran out into the hall.

"Murder! Help!" he yelled.

From other offices in the building came clerks and brokers. They rushed into the place.

But there they paused, aghast. Strong men turned sick and faint.

The Texan had recovered himself, and now regained his feet.

He was the color of chalk, but very calm. He gazed into the mutilated features of the corpse, and said, tensely:

"Joseph, you are gone. It is the fate of the Smalls. I am the last one left. God be with me and give me strength, for I mean to devote my life to the avenging of your death."

By this time the police had arrived.

A line of officers kept out the curious crowd. The coroner came next.

He took charge of the remains pending an inquest. Then the Texan went back to his quarters at the Waldorf Hotel, and Mr. Bradcombe went to his home.

Business was over for the day in the banker's office.

The shock was so great that the banker was made ill.

The report of the strange murder filled the columns of all the daily papers.

There was great excitement.

No more mysterious crime had ever occurred in the great city of New York. All sorts of theories were advanced.

But Mr. Bradcombe sent a message to the chief of the Secret Service.

"Put your best men on the case," he said. "Spare no expense."



The chief was thoughtful.

"If anybody can get at the facts in that case, it is the Bradys," he decided.

So he sent for these two famous detectives.

For years the name of Old King Brady had been a terror to the crooks of Gotham. Of late years this famous sleuth had been seen with a partner.

This was a young detective known as Harry Brady.

The result was that they soon became known as the two Bradys. They were the peers of their profession.

It was for these noted detectives that the chief had sent.

When they appeared he laid the facts of the case before them.

"A strange murder has been committed," he said. "The question is, who is the assassin and what was his motive?"

"There is another mystery," said Old King Brady quietly.

"Ah! What is that?"

"What brought the two together in Mr. Bradcombe's private office? What was the business of either there?"

"That is so," agreed the chief.

"When you get the solution of the mystery the case is ended."

"Save for the capture of the murderer."

"That will never be settled until he is captured."

"Well, do I understand that you will take the case?"

"We will."

"I wish you good luck."

"We shall look for it."

The chief looked at the detectives with much curiosity. He said:

"I wish I knew just what your first move would be?"

"Do you wish to know?"

"Yes."

"Well," said Old King Brady, "I leave it to Harry; he will tell you."

The younger detective at once replied:

"First, it will be in order to visit Mr. Stanley Small at his hotel."

"Very good."

"When we have gathered all the facts we can from him we will go down to the banker's office and look it over."

"Enough," said the chief confidently. "You'll have the murderer in a week. I know you will win."

"No," said Old King Brady; "not so soon as that. But you may be sure we will fight hard to get him."

## CHAPTER II.

### A REMARKABLE FATALITY.

Stanley Small paced the floor of his room at the Fifth Avenue Hotel.

He was nervous and pallid.

The affair had been an awful shock to him. It was not easy for him to recover.

His brother Joseph had been very dear to him. His loss in this awful manner was a serious matter.

Suddenly there was a rap at the door.

"Come in!" he called.

A servant entered bearing a salver. On it was a card.

The Texan read:

"The Bradys: Detectives."

He turned, and said:

"Show them up."

Then a few moments later the two famous detectives stood in his presence. He shook hands with them.

"Gentlemen," he said, "do you think you can find the fiend who killed my brother?"

Old King Brady said bluntly:

"We can, and will."

"If you will I will sacrifice all my interests in the oil country. You shall have all I am worth."

"Pshaw!" said Old King Brady, "we don't want it, my friend. Have no fear; we will find the murderer."

"I am grateful."

"But——"

"What?"

"We must have from you all the light possible on this mystery."

The Texan sank into a chair.

"Command me," he said. "I am wholly at your disposal."

"Well," said the old detective, "did you expect to find your brother at Mr. Bradcombe's office?"

"No," replied the Texan. "I did not even know he was in New York."

"Is he associated in business with you?"

"No. He was a merchant in Boston."

"Ah! How do you account for his presence in Mr. Bradcombe's office?"

"I cannot account for it. Of course it must have been a coincidence. Doubtless he came down from Boston to see Mr. Bradcombe the same time I came from Texas."

"Have you an enemy?"

The Texan was thoughtful.

"None that I have ever seen," he said; "but I am assured that I have a secret foe."

"A secret foe?"

"Yes."

"Please explain your meaning?"

"In order to do that I must give you a little family history."

He cleared his throat, and resumed:

"In my mind I can think of only one being and one motive. The former I have never seen.

"But my father and my grandfather, my mother and two brothers all died at the hands of a mysterious assassin."

The Bradys were astounded.

"That is very strange," said Old King Brady. "Do you know who the assassin was?"

"No."

"Have you no theory?"

"Well," said Small, after some moments of thought, "I



must admit that I do have a theory; but you might laugh at it."

"I assure you not."

"It may seem absurd."

"Nonsense! Go ahead."

The Texan then bit his mustache and after some thought began his story.

"It was thus," he said. "Thirty years ago my grandfather was in Mexico. He was a widower of mature years, but yet eligible and worth a good deal of money."

"My grandfather made many pleasant acquaintances in Mexico. Among them was the family of Don Enrique Velasco. He was highly entertained by the Mexican nobility.

"Don Enrique had a beautiful daughter, Inez. My grandfather promptly fell in love with her. He proposed for her hand, but Don Enrique forbade his daughter to marry an American.

"In spite of this the lovers met surreptitiously. There were many happy hours until a meddling duenna spoiled it all.

"The duenna was hired with gold by a dissolute young Spaniard named Pedro Alvarez. This fellow was in love with Inez.

"The result was that Inez decided to elope with my grandfather; but that night she was found with a stiletto in her heart in her garden.

"Don Enrique was like a maniac over the loss of his daughter. He swore an awful vow of vengeance. His curse named root and branch of the family.

"He was convinced that my grandfather was the murderer of Inez. With the lack of forethought of all Spaniards, he charged the crime up to him.

"The result was that my grandfather had to leave Mexico. He went to Ohio, where he lived quietly for a time.

"Then one day he was found in his room mutilated and dead. The work looked amazingly like this present job.

"The avenging Nemesis pursued the entire family.

"My father was found with a stiletto in his heart. My mother next followed; then my brothers. Ah, it was awful!"

The Texan paused a moment. His voice had grown emotional, and his eyes were moist.

"And now they have taken my brother Joseph! Ah, I suppose they will strike me next; but it must be in an unguarded hour. I am always on the alert."

"Do you suppose your brother feared this strange Nemesis?"

"No; I think not. He did not know caution. I know that he was decoyed and foully murdered."

"Have you ever seen or heard of Don Enrique since then?"

"I have not seen him; but I have a number of his pictures. He is a fine-looking man; but his black temper may have made a devil of him."

The detectives were satisfied.

"It is all explained," they said. "We can see what the

motive is. Some strange fiend, insane and devilish, is on your track."

The Texan leaned forward.

"I believe it," he said. "Mind you, I do not fear for myself. I am not afraid of the assassin."

"Do you think this assassin may have been Don Enrique?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I only know that I heard that Don Enrique lost his fortune and died. The report was that he died in the desert. It was only a report. He had sworn vengeance upon all surviving members of our family."

"It was a strange and awful vow."

"Yes."

"But all in keeping with the fiery, inconsistent nature of the Spaniard. Their feud is against all of kin."

"I know it."

"Now, this secret assassin is Don Enrique or his emissary. We advise you to use all caution!"

"I shall do so."

"In the meanwhile let matters rest. Go on with your business just the same. We will be at work, and we promise you that sooner or later we will locate your man."

"Heaven reward you!" cried Small, warmly. "I shall hope for your success."

"We will succeed."

The Bradys then took their leave. They now went down to Broad Street to the office of the banker.

Very carefully and minutely the detectives looked over the office. Everything was closely examined.

Then they made quite an important discovery.

Ground into the carpet was a tiny pin with an agate stone. It was of Mexican manufacture.

"There we have it," said Old King Brady, confidently. "It may seem a small clew, but it's a clew all the same. It proves the Mexican origin of the assassin."

"Then you believe the murderer owned this pin?"

"It is my belief."

The Bradys took care to carefully preserve this bit of a clew.

The case was now on.

Step by step they picked up the threads, Stanley Small aiding them all he could.

Meanwhile the Giant Gusher stock leaped into the market.

It was a boomer for a while. Then set in a reaction. Bradcombe, the aged promoter, however, knew better than to let the business drop.

He kept it up with the best of efforts; but in order to do this he was obliged to involve his private fortune.

One day a consultation was held in his office.

Mr. Bradcombe was quite willing to risk his all in backing the Giant Gusher.

But, on the other hand, Stanley Small, who was honorable to a fault, said:

"My good friend, I am not going to see you lose your all. Draw out now, and I will shoulder the load alone."

"You will fail," declared the banker.



"Well, so be it; but I must not be the means of your ruin."

Bradcombe was deeply affected.

"We have somewhere a persistent enemy," he declared. "All sorts of damaging rumors are set afloat to bear down the stock."

Stanley Small smiled in a weary way.

"It's the curse of the Smalls," he said. "The deadly Nemesis is on our track. You must not fall under its bane."

"If we could only discover that strange foe——"

"But you cannot! It is quite impossible. I shall myself fall by his hand. It is so ordered. We are under a curse."

Mr. Bradcombe was impressed.

"It is very strange."

"Yes; but the fact remains."

"Something can be done."

"I doubt it. You will see that it cannot be averted. Do you know, I have always been an eminently practical man."

"Yes."

"But my nerves are shaken. I faithfully believe that there is a supernatural agency at work."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed the banker.

"No; listen to me. It is not at all a fallacy. I have experienced the sensation in many ways. I dare not go anywhere in the dark. I believe an invisible grip would throttle me."

The Texan spoke with all sincerity.

His haggard, care-worn face showed plainly his mental distress.

Bradcombe strove to disabuse his partner's mind of this fancy.

"It could not be," he said. "There is no such thing as the supernatural on earth. Come, cheer up."

"I wish I could; but I see the handwriting on the wall."

"It is all the work of a human foe. He is cunning and clever, but sooner or later he will fall."

"You are very kind to speak to me these words of cheer; but can you give me certain explanations?"

"What?"

"If my foe is human, how can he be so intangible, so invisible and so deadly? Why do not these most skilled detectives get a clew?"

"They will. The case is young."

"I wish I could believe it."

"You must believe it. You shall see that it will be so. The Bradys will find a correct solution of the mystery, and I will stake my life on it."

But the Texan shook his head. He was the victim of most bitter despondency, for which there seemed no relief.

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE DOUBLE GAME.

It is hard to conceive of anything more terrible and distressing than the feeling that death in the shape of a merciless unseen foe is dogging one's footsteps.

The utter helplessness of such a position, the dread uncertainty is something beyond power of description.

The Bradys assumed the case at this most remarkable stage.

In all their career they had never assumed one like it.

It promised to demand of them their best efforts, and wholly without any certainty of success.

They were working in the dark.

To them it seemed the safest and surest way to keep the intended victim in sight.

The secret assassin must shadow him, and in doing this the detectives believed they would surely get him.

"It is our only game," declared Harry. "At least just now."

"Very true."

They did not base anything upon the supernatural view of the case, as taken by the Texan.

To them the assassin was a living flesh and blood reality. This much and nothing more.

Stanley Small was residing at the Fifth Avenue Hotel. One day there came to him a queer telegram.

It read:

BEAUMONT, Texas.

"Mr. Stanley Small:—If you don't return to Beaumont at once you will lose the Giant Gusher. This is a tip. Take it and act accordingly. Yours,  
A FRIEND."

At first the Texan was disposed to give little heed to this anonymous message; but the more he thought of it the more deeply it weighed upon his mind.

He sent word to the chief of the Secret Service.

"Please send your detectives to me at once. I have something of interest."

When the chief received this message he at once sent for the Bradys. They proceeded to the hotel.

They found Mr. Small pacing the floor in a nervous state of mind.

"Ah! I am glad you have come," he said. "I was never so nervous in my life."

"What is the matter?" was the query.

The Texan sat down and ran his fingers through his hair.

"Read that message," he said. "Tell me what you think of it."

The Bradys did so.

Old King Brady looked at Harry. They were thoughtful a moment.

Then the old detective said:

"It is certainly a queer thing. There is something under it."

"You think so? You share my opinion?"

"Well, yes."

"Good! I feared you would think it of no value. What is your opinion?"

"Well, do you think of any possible harm that could come to the Giant Gusher?"



"Not the slightest."

"It is evident that somebody wants you to come to Beaumont at once. There is a purpose underneath it."

"To be sure."

"What can it be?"

"That I cannot guess, unless——"

"Well?"

"It is a plot to entrap me."

The Bradys were thoughtful. Finally Old King Brady said:

"Are you prepared to follow advice?"

"Yes, anything from you."

"Then go to Beaumont."

The Texan stared.

"Do you mean that?"

"Well, not literally. Work it this way: Let it be known that you have gone to Beaumont. In reality you remain here in New York."

The Texan was startled.

"That is an odd plan," he said. "What is the advantage?"

"Simply this: You will puzzle the plotter, and perhaps throw him off his track. You may then leave the rest to us."

"Well," said Small, dubiously, "how can I bring about that result?"

"Very easily. Simply send personals to the newspapers that Mr. Stanley Small, President of the Giant Gusher Company, has returned to Beaumont."

"And in the meantime, what am I to do?"

"Be somebody else."

"I do not understand."

"We will give you a disguise to wear. You can slip out of this hotel easily, walk down the street, and return later and register under another name. I am about your build. I will make up to resemble you. With my partner here I will proceed to Beaumont."

The Texan was astounded.

"What a game!" he exclaimed. "You dare incur that risk?"

"It is just what I want."

"But they may murder you!"

Old King Brady laughed.

"I want to lure them," he said. "I will risk the result. If I do not trap our cunning secret assassin it will not be my fault."

The Texan was deeply impressed.

"You are brave men," he said; "but I can see the possibilities of your scheme. It is grand."

"Then you are willing to try it?"

"I am at your disposal."

"Very good," said Old King Brady. "It must be done at once. Just go down to the office and notify them that you start for Texas to-day."

"Yes."

"Then leave word at the News Bureau that your personal must be inserted in every New York paper."

"Exactly."

"Tell the hotel people that you will reserve your apartment, and leave your trunks here."

"Very good."

"Then come here, and we will do the rest."

The Texan hastened away to do this. He was gone nearly half an hour. When he returned his face was bright and his step light.

"I have followed your directions," he said. "Do you know, I feel as if the bane was already lifted from me."

"I think we can carry it with better grace than you," said Old King Brady.

"Oh, if you do deliver me from it I shall ever pray for you," he declared. "I cannot tell you how much better I feel, not that life is so dear to me, either."

"We understand."

The Bradys now went to work.

They were masters of the art of make-up. It did not take them long to make the desired changes.

Old King Brady sent for a small trunk at his lodgings.

It arrived safely within the hour. Then the work of transformation began.

Small was made up for an entirely different type of man. When he looked in the glass he did not know himself.

Old King Brady gave him a phial of complexion stain.

"Apply this every week," he said. "It will then keep good. It is harmless, and will readily yield to an acid when you wish to remove it."

"Wonderful! I do not know myself."

"No. There is nothing so changes one as the complexion. Now, the eyebrows and the lines about the eyes must be renewed every third day."

"Yes."

"Wig and beard will last as long as you need them. Do not become intimate with anybody. Keep your distance to avoid suspicion."

"I will follow your directions explicitly."

"Do so and you are safe."

"You think so?"

"I know it."

The Texan drew a breath of relief.

"I would wear this disguise all my life," he said, "if I thought it would give me that much-coveted feeling of safety and security."

"It will not be necessary for you to do it after we return from Texas," said Old King Brady.

"You are sanguine."

"Wait until you see my make-up."

The old detective began work.

In a few moments he had a complexion to match the usually florid one of Small. Then he fitted on a wig like the Texan's own hair, and made lines at mouth and eyes. The features were strangely like the Texan's in contour.

This was an aid.

Small was the same stature, and Old King Brady could wear his suit. Then he donned the broad white hat.

Small was amazed.

"Whew!" he exclaimed. "It certainly is me. You are my double."



The old detective laughed.

"That is not all," he said. "I must study your mannerisms a little. Then I must know a little about your business."

For an hour there was a rehearsal of this sort.

Then Old King Brady was satisfied.

"It will do," he said. "Mr. Small, you are now Julien Kane. You may take this traveling grip and rug and walk out of the hotel. Walk back here in an hour and register. We will write you from Beaumont."

"Will you?" cried the Texan, eagerly.

"Certainly."

"Ah, you are wonderful men. Gentlemen, I wish you good fortune."

"Thank you!"

Old King Brady opened the door and looked out into the hotel corridor.

"The coast is clear," he said. "Slip out while you can."

Small did so. In a few moments he was on the street.

To him it was like passing out from under the shadow of death.

Life opened new and safe to him. It was like a new lease.

Old King Brady, on the other hand, had placed himself in the shadow of the awful vendetta.

But he did so voluntarily and without fear. He believed that he had the power to trick the secret assassin.

When Small had departed Harry next took his leave.

Then Old King Brady, in the guise of the Texan, went below stairs.

He strolled about the office, leisurely went to the desk and gave a few orders. Several gentlemen greeted him.

He was Stanley Small, the Texan.

The old detective saw that the deception was complete.

Then he purchased his railroad ticket, and wired the foreman of the Giant Gusher that he was on his way.

The game had begun.

It was to be a most exciting one. Before it was played out the Bradys were to find it the greatest of all their cases.

Harry bought his ticket and occupied another car.

The Bradys thus left New York.

At no time during his journey to the train, or even after he had boarded it, was Old King Brady conscious of anyone on his track.

That usual premonition of such a thing was absent.

He half felt disposed to blame Small for needless trepidation; but when Chicago was reached he changed his mind.

A new lot of passengers got on the train. Every berth in the car was occupied.

And a strange sensation came to Old King Brady.

He was no believer in the occult.

But it seemed to him as real as life that a mysterious shadow was at his shoulder; that a deadly missile hung over his head.

A more unpleasant sensation could hardly be conceived.

The old detective now realized to a nicety what the Texan's state of mind had been. And he sympathized with him.

## CHAPTER IV.

### UNDER THE SHADOW.

The train sped rapidly southward after leaving Chicago. To St. Louis the travelers were carried, and then westward. The oil country of Texas was drawing nearer.

It was not until they reached St. Louis that the Bradys fell in with any unusual adventure.

Then a strange thing happened.

It came near costing Old King Brady his life.

His berth was midway in the car. He retired as usual at night just after leaving St. Louis.

The train was booming along at a fair rate of speed. The passengers were apparently all asleep.

The old detective was in the midst of a dream. It speedily assumed the hideous form of a nightmare.

He saw again the interior of Bradcombe's office.

On the table was the severed head; but this time the head was his. The old detective gave a start and awoke. Then a strange sensation oppressed him.

It was akin to that of hypnotism. It was as if some subtle influence was enchaining his spirit and rendering his body helpless.

Then, through what seemed a mist, the old detective saw the parted curtains of his berth. A masked face was in the opening.

He saw the glittering flash of a steel blade. With a yell he lurched forward to grapple with the assailant.

The blade flashed before his eyes. Never had he been so near death before.

The cold steel grazed his neck. He had been saved by a miracle.

The assassin had missed his aim.

The blade sank deep in the car cushion. It caught there and held.

The would-be murderer tried to wrench it free. Old King Brady struck out fiercely with his fist.

The blow took his assailant full between the eyes.

He reeled back, and then started away down the car aisle.

Old King Brady leaped out of the berth and started after him; but he reached the car door first.

He opened and slammed the door in the old detective's face. Old King Brady was bothered a moment by the lock catching.

When he succeeded in getting the door open the unknown was gone.

The porter, of course, had been asleep in the other end of the car. The noise of the scuffle had aroused some of the passengers.

These now sprang up.

When Old King Brady returned there was tremendous excitement. The train hands and the conductor next arrived.

An investigation was in order. That there had been an attempt at murder was very clearly proved.

The knife, a dangerous dirk, was yet caught in the car cushions. It was a tell-tale bit of evidence.



The passengers and trainmen were horrified. Then began a search for the assassin.

But if he was on the train he could not be identified.

"Could you see his face?" Old King Brady was asked.

"No," he answered. "He wore a mask. It is my opinion that he leaped from the train."

"Then he has gone to his death," said the conductor. "We were running fully fifty miles an hour."

"In any event," said Old King Brady, "I will pay a large reward for information leading to his capture."

"We cannot run the train back," said the conductor; "but at the next station I will wire. If he was killed the section hands will find his body."

"I wish you would do so."

This was done.

Two hundred miles further on there came an answer. It was handed to Old King Brady.

It read:

"Stanley Small, on Train No. 16:—Nobody has been found between Ellis and Portvale. The stranger may have escaped injury.  
WARD SMITH, Section Chief."

"There it is," muttered the old detective. "The black wretch has escaped. It is just his kind of luck. An ordinary man would have been killed."

During the rest of the run to Beaumont the old detective had no feeling of impending peril.

Beaumont was a typical oil town. It had grown up like a mushroom in the desert.

It was in the throes of the fever of speculation. On every face was the drawn look of anxiety and lust for wealth.

When Old King Brady reached the place he went at once to the hotel. Here he was assigned to a room.

The report that the oil king had arrived created much excitement in Beaumont.

Owners of adjoining wells and an army of investors and promoters visited the hotel and importuned him.

It was necessary for the old detective to resort to much diplomacy.

But his tact did not fail him.

He played his part well.

Stanley Small had coached him, and he was able to answer all arguments and adjust all questions.

After a day or two of this sort of thing Old King Brady felt that it was time for him to hear from the author of the mysterious telegram.

He visited the Giant Gusher and all the smaller wells.

But nothing out of the ordinary was noticed. There seemed no reason for a belief or a fear that the Gusher was in danger.

The output was as strong as ever. In fact, a new vein had been struck which added to the total output.

Harry played his part well.

This was to act as a shadow upon Old King Brady. It was a counterplot to entrap the mysterious assassin.

But he did not show his hand.

For some reason or other there was no attempt made to do the oil king harm. He was apparently safe.

Yet Old King Brady was not deceived.

He knew that the real danger was just as present as ever. Not for one moment must he relax eternal vigilance.

His position was a dangerous one. He stood in the shadow of a doomed man.

In doing this he was placing his own life at stake.

A week passed and affairs ran along smoothly at Beaumont.

The two detectives met on the street one day, and Harry said:

"Are we on a blind lead? I can't see any sign yet."

"That is all right," said Old King Brady. "We must wait."

"Do you think there can be any danger of our game being probed?"

Old King Brady was thoughtful.

"That would be awful," he said.

"It would be death to one man and defeat for us."

"I cannot believe that it is so. We will not consider it."

"There is no doubt, though, that the telegram was a trap."

"Not at all."

"I have only one faint clew."

"What is it?"

"You know there was mention made of the destruction of the Giant Gusher. In fact, that was the warning."

"Yes."

"Come with me," said Harry.

"Where?"

"Up to the oil well."

Old King Brady followed wonderingly. The Giant Gusher was a few hundred yards away. It did not take long to reach the great shaft.

Here the oil current poured night and day from a tube sunk deep in the earth.

The great tower loomed above every object about.

"Now take a look down there," said Harry. "Observe that the Gusher stands on the highest point of land hereabouts."

"Yes."

"Here are the great storage tanks with thousands of gallons in them."

"Very true."

"Observe that on either side of us are ridges. The land trends down here into the village street."

"I see it."

"Now," continued Harry quietly, "this is only a supposition. If the storage tanks should burst, or the well pipe what would be the result?"

Old King Brady shivered.

"The town would be deluged with a flood of oil," he said.

"Worse than that," said the young detective. "What if the oil flood should strike a fire or a blaze anywhere in its course?"

"Horrible!" gasped the old detective. "The whole com-



unity would go up in one awful blast of flame. Not a remnant would be left to tell the tale."

Then, speechless with the enormity of the supposition, the Bradys stood and looked down into the little town.

The awful possibility in all its force was upon them.

It made them turn cold at heart and feel sick and faint.

At any moment this awful thing might happen. That is, the fiend had laid his wires with that end in view.

On the other hand, the feat would not be an easy one.

It could only be accomplished by the shrewdest of work. The oil well was well and strongly guarded.

Of course there was always the possibility of its getting fire. Oil wells often go up in a cataract of flame.

But armed men were always on hand to guard against this contingency.

In fact, it looked to be almost an impossibility for anyone to get at the tanks or the well.

But the Bradys knew that the secret assassin was a person of resource.

They understood the intended trap well now. This was why the Texan had been lured to Beaumont.

This was why Old King Brady had been free from secret attack. The moment was not ripe.

The fiend was biding his time.

He knew that his intended victim dwelt in the little hotel at the foot of the hill. When the flood of death was let loose he would be in that hotel and beyond rescue.

The awful horror and fiendishness of the plot appalled the Bradys.

They had no doubt that this was a true diagnosis of the case.

Slowly they walked down the hill. As they went on Old King Brady said:

"Harry, there is a great duty before us."

"What?"

"We must not stand by and see so many lives sacrificed. Even at the cost of losing our man, we must give warning."

"Yes."

"The innocent lives must be saved."

"But we cannot prove that this thing is likely to occur."

"Then we must do all we can."

"What can we do?"

"Take desperate measures. Notify the people of their danger and move the town."

"The people will object to that."

"I foresee that."

"However, as you say, it is our only chance. It is hardly likely that there will be any attempt made to destroy the town to-night. Let us on the morrow search the whole place over to find, if possible, a trace of the work of the fiend. He must surely leave some visible trace behind him."

## CHAPTER V.

### A FEARFUL POSSIBILITY.

"So it would seem," agreed Old King Brady. "Your plan is good."

The Bradys went back to the hotel.

But they could not feel easy. There was no sleep for them that night.

"That settles it," said Old King Brady. "I'm going to do a little shadow work around the oil works."

"All right."

"Are you agreeable?"

"I am."

So the detectives crept cautiously up the hill in the darkness. They hung about in the darkness for hours.

They could hear the guards as they made their rounds.

Once, as a test, Old King Brady advanced to the foot of the shaft. At once he was halted by the watchman.

"Pshaw!" said Harry. "The only way the thing can be done is by collusion with the guards."

"That is possible."

"Yes, but not probable."

The detectives finally tired of their efforts, and meditated a return.

Yet Old King Brady would not accept his fears as groundless. He walked down into the darkness some distance on the other side of the ridge.

Suddenly he gave a start.

Harry uttered a muffled exclamation. Both detectives saw a dark figure glide away over the ridge.

In another moment another followed. They seemed to rise from the ground.

Then to the ears of the Bradys came a queer metallic sound. It was like steel striking upon steel far in the distance.

The detectives were puzzled.

"What do you make of that?" whispered Old King Brady.

"Give it up," said Harry. "It is something odd."

The detectives crept along some distance over the ridge. Old King Brady knelt down and applied his ear to the ground.

A distant, faint reverberation greeted his hearing.

It was continued for some moments, and then died away.

The detectives were puzzled.

They made their way slowly back over the ridge. Finally Old King Brady said:

"It sounded to me like some one drilling for oil."

Harry gave a sharp cry.

"Ah, that is it!" he cried. "No doubt it is underground work. Perhaps being unable to reach the Giant Gusher in any other way they are trying a subterranean excavation."

Old King Brady's vision cleared.

"Exactly," he cried. "Harry, you have hit the nail on the head."

"I think so."

"In that case Don Enrique, if it is he, has colleagues."

"Yes."

The Bradys were quite overwhelmed with the enormity of this possibility.

They knew that it was quite possible to tap the shaft underground. A charge of dynamite would liberate the oil in storage, and the result would be what was desired.

Down into Beaumont would rush the awful flood of death.



The Bradys could not sleep that night. They paced the floor of their room.

A hundred times they would go to the window and look up at the great tower of the Giant Gusher.

When morning came they felt that it was necessary to act.

Old King Brady procured a marking pot and brush. Then he printed a lot of rough placards.

These read as follows:

"To the Citizens of Beaumont:—A mass meeting will be held this afternoon at three o'clock on the hillside by the Giant Gusher. A matter of very great importance, in fact, involving the lives of all in the town, will be discussed.

"Per order, STANLEY SMALL."

It is hardly necessary to say that a tremendous sensation was created. The poster both surprised and puzzled the people.

Hard-working, rough denizens they were all of them.

But their homes and their lives were dear to them. It was a surety that all would be on hand.

Meanwhile the Town Committee called on Old King Brady.

"Mr. Small," they inquired, "what is the meaning of this notice?"

"I will tell you," said the pseudo Texan. "The life of every man, woman and child in this town is in deadly danger."

"In danger? From what?"

"If you will come with me I will show you."

The committee accompanied Old King Brady to the hillside overlooking the town. He pointed out to them the possibilities as viewed by himself and Harry.

The committee, who were rather a stubborn, short-sighted body of men, seemed disposed to take exception.

"Pshaw!" said one. "There is danger everywhere. At any moment Nature may send an earthquake and swallow us up."

"Still," said Old King Brady, "if you knew of a plan to certainly obviate that earthquake you would embrace it, would you not?"

"No. We are in the hands of Providence. When death gets ready to come, it will find us wherever we are."

"On the strength of that you would jump into a fire and expect to come out unscathed, for death was not ready for you?"

"I might."

"That is folly! It is quite possible for us to guard against peril in this life."

"I believe ye!" cried one.

But the hard-headed committee man would not yield.

"Move the town," he sneered. "That is a piece of folly. The Gusher will never give way unless somebody cuts it loose."

"You do not consider that a possibility?"

"Do you?"

"It is a possibility."

"Oh, nonsense! You have some reason for moving the town. Perhaps you want to sink a well there."

"There is no possibility of such a thing," said Old King Brady.

"What is your motive, then?"

"Simply humanitarian. I do not want to see human life endangered."

"Well, I'll bet every citizen in the place will vote against it."

"That settles it, then."

"You don't stop to think that most of us have all our savings in our homes there. It would mean a great loss."

"Enough," said Old King Brady desperately. "Let me give you dire warning. The angel of Death is folding his wings over this valley. Save yourselves while you can."

The old detective spoke impressively.

The other members of the committee were suddenly impressed. Some of them turned pale with the thought.

But Simpson, the obdurate member, still held out.

"You are all fools," he said. "Move away if you think it best. I'm going to stay."

That afternoon probably every citizen in the town attended the mass meeting.

The Bradys were there, and Old King Brady stated his views.

"I own this well," he said; "but you own your own homes in the town. With them you may do as you please; but give you fair warning."

"Oh, you do!" cried Simpson. "Who would be to blame if the Giant Gusher should break?"

"Certainly not I," replied Old King Brady. "Everything is done to avert it. I have now warned you of your danger. I can do no more."

This was a telling shot.

A murmur ran through the crowd. One of the townspeople asked:

"If we move will you reimburse us for our loss?"

"I don't think your loss will be much. The hill is a better locality."

"Move your well, then," cried Simpson. "Put it on the other side of the slope. It is easier for you than for us."

Old King Brady grasped the point.

"I will do that if you will give me assistance."

There was a momentary hush. Then a chorus of voices went up.

"We don't work for nothing. That is your lookout," they said.

Old King Brady saw that it was of no use to longer argue the point, so the meeting disbanded and the Bradys returned to the hotel.

They were chagrined.

"Well," said Harry, "there is only one course left open to us."

"What?"

"We must head off this underground attack on the Gusher."

"In order to do that we must find the tunnel entrance."

"Yes."



The Bradys pondered over the matter well. They were positive that an attempt was being made to destroy the Gusher.

And now a new side to the question was presented.

"When I recall the message of warning," said Old King Brady, "it occurs to me that after all it may have been sent in good faith."

"How so?"

"Well, some person may have discovered the plot to destroy the Gusher and wired Small to that effect. In other words, the warning may have been well meant."

"And not a decoy?"

"Exactly."

The detectives looked at each other.

"That person is no doubt in this town. Perhaps the secret emission of the Smalls may not be in any way connected with it."

"It is possible."

"It may be the plot of a rival company, or even of outlaws, who hope to thus destroy the greatest oil well in the region."

"In any case, we must frustrate the game," declared Harry.

"At any cost."

The Bradys laid their plans. Later in the day they took a trip over the ridge into the other valley.

They were heavily armed.

They made a close and careful quest. Every thicket, every copse and ledge were examined closely.

But no sign whatever was found of the existence of a tunnel. No ground was broken anywhere.

"It is possible," said Old King Brady, "that the tunnel comes from some quite distant point."

"Or, what is just as possible, the heart of the village itself."

"Exactly."

"We surely can find no trace of it on this side of the hill."

"Not the least."

"Let us go back to town."

"All right."

So the detectives gave up the quest for the day. It was their purpose to return at night to the spot where they had heard the metallic sound.

They were not discouraged.

But they were not disposed to waste time. They started along a path toward the Gusher.

They had covered half the distance when a sharp report resounded behind them. Instantly Old King Brady gave a cry:

"Oh, Harry! I'm shot!"

The old detective reeled, and then throwing up his arms fell. Blood covered his face.

Harry turned like a flash, and saw a wisp of smoke in a distant thicket.

Instantly he opened fire with his revolver; but there was no reply.

## CHAPTER VI.

### A FEARFUL DEED.

Harry riddled the thicket with pistol shots, but no answer came back.

He did not attempt to pursue the craven assassin. He turned and gave his attention to Old King Brady.

The old detective lay unconscious on the hillside. Blood covered his face.

But an examination gave Harry the joyful discovery that the old detective was not mortally wounded.

It was merely a scalp wound he had received, and it had stunned but not seriously injured him.

A little brandy from a flask brought him to all right.

The old detective got upon his feet, dizzy and confused. Harry got water from a small spring near by, and washed his face and dressed the wound.

"By Jove! That was a close call for me," said the old detective. "The fellow is a good shot."

"So he is," agreed Harry; "but not good enough to accomplish his ends."

"Which for me is most fortunate."

"Indeed, yes."

"Where could he have been when he fired that shot?"

"In that thicket yonder."

Old King Brady rubbed his eyes and stared at the spot.

Then he shrugged his shoulders.

"It is all right to be playing the part of a condemned man," he said; "but I frankly admit I don't like it. If there was any other way to gain our ends I'd draw out of it at once."

"We must certainly use more care," declared Harry.

"Well," said the old detective, "I don't see that we can gain anything more by staying around here. Let us go back to the town."

"All right."

So back to the town they went. Old King Brady managed to dress his wound so that it would attract but little attention.

The detectives went to their room at the hotel.

They were in a very much distressed and uneasy frame of mind.

They could not keep their gaze from the oil tower on the hill.

It seemed to them every moment as if the explosion must come and awful holocaust result.

And to think that many hundred people lived thus under this awful death shadow and would not listen to the warning was awful.

Old King Brady paced the floor.

"What can we do, Harry?" he asked. "It seems quite useless to warn the people. They will not believe it."

"It looks to me now as if the work of undermining the Giant Gusher is not altogether the work of the secret assassin."

"I have thought of that."



"In fact, I don't believe it is. I don't believe the assassin has anything to do with this plot."

"Who, then, is at the bottom of it?"

"Some rival gang. Perhaps a band of outlaws who hope to in some way reap a profit."

"I fail to see where their profit comes in."

"Well, it is a mystery; but still I cling to the theory."

"I am inclined the same way."

"We must thwart them."

"Certainly."

"It is not going to be an easy task, but it must be done. If the people of this town will not save themselves we must save them."

"How would it do to call upon the State for aid? Bring the militia here and force the miners to leave their homes until an investigation revealed the truth?"

"Texas is not the sort of a country to stand for that. There would be bloodshed."

The Bradys were really desperate.

What could be done?

There was a possibility that the schemers were yet far from completing their tunnel, and the work of destruction was yet far off.

This was the only ray of hope that the Bradys found.

They had even thought of telegraphing Stanley for advice.

But finally exhausted Nature overcame all else, and they went to bed and slept even under the shadow of the volcano.

The next morning before sunrise Old King Brady was astir.

He awoke Harry.

"Get up, lad," he said. "I have a plan. There is work before us."

The young detective sprang up.

His first move was to rub his eyes and look at the Giant Gusher.

"It is still there," he said; "but what is your plan?"

"There is nobody astir in the town yet. Let us change our disguise a bit and go out."

"All right."

It did not take the detectives long to do this. They metamorphosed their personal appearance, and then left the hotel quietly.

They met a few of the oil men on their way to work.

But it was plain that they did not recognize the detectives.

The Bradys carelessly sauntered up the hill and again down the slope beyond.

Suddenly Old King Brady said:

"Do you detect anything unusual, Harry?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"There is an odd vibration of the earth. I should say there was work going on under our feet."

The detectives looked at each other.

Then Old King Brady said:

"Suppose we bring a gang of men over here on the pre-

tence of sinking a new shaft? We can drive a number of pipes hereabouts, and perhaps hit on the tunnel, if really there is such."

"A capital plan!" agreed Harry. "Let us mark the spot."

"We will find out what is going on here if we have to dig up the entire hill."

"Just the idea. I am sure if Mr. Small was here he would sanction it."

"Ah! Great heavens! What is that?"

Both detectives stood appalled at that moment. The ground trembled beneath their feet as if with an earthquake. There was an awful roar of thunder.

It was as if a thousand parks of artillery had exploded. The air seemed in commotion as with a tempest.

In that one swift instant the Bradys had but one thought. They were morally sure that the Giant Gusher was blowing up, and that the fate of Beaumont was settled.

With white faces and gasping for breath they gazed up the hill.

No! There stood the great tower intact; but men were seen rushing from the platform.

What had happened?

The detectives waited no longer. They started up the hill. Breathless and staggering they reached the summit. A glance was enough.

Beyond the main street of the town was the railroad.

Along this were lines of tank cars. Pipes from a main reservoir of oil led to them. A great wall of flame hundreds of feet high had engulfed tanks, railroad and a vast space of overflowed region beyond.

Fortunately the blazing oil had run in another direction than the town. The ground sloped that way.

In some mysterious manner the great storage reservoir had caught fire and exploded.

Burning oil was scattered for half a mile about.

A dozen dwellings in the little town were on fire. The prairie beyond was a sheet of flames.

Beaumont was in a paroxysm of awful terror. People at that early hour ran half clad from their homes.

"My soul!" gasped Harry. "Is not that an awful spectacle?"

"It certainly is."

"How fortunate that it is on the other side of the town."

"Ugh! That is so."

"Will not this be a warning to these misguided people?"

"It ought to."

"Now the question is, what caused the explosion?"

The two detectives looked at each other. Their faces were white.

"That may never be known," said Old King Brady.

"There are many theories."

"Yes."

"The carelessness of an employee, the premature explosion of a boiler, perhaps a spark from a locomotive, or—"

"A malicious plot."

"There you are."



"It will probably never be known, for no man in or about that spot will be found to speak the truth."

"He would be wiped out of existence."

"Yes."

"Well, we must not dally here. It is necessary for us to give all the assistance we can."

"Come on."

Down into the town the detectives ran. In their disguise they were not known.

The desultory fires among the houses caused by the blazing oil were now under control.

The Bradys, therefore, made their way as near as possible to the scene of the conflagration.

It was fortunate that the connections with the tower were closed, otherwise the blaze would have traveled to the hill, and the entire oil plant would have been wiped out.

As it was, nothing could be done but to allow the flames to exhaust themselves.

Gradually, as the oil was licked up by the flames, the fire subsided.

But the railroad station and all the cars were completely destroyed.

There was nothing left but twisted heaps of old iron.

It was hours before anybody could venture near the scene, so thoroughly heated was the ground.

The Bradys were positive that it had been the work of incendiaries.

They were sure that there was a deep-laid and persistent purpose to wipe Beaumont off the map.

"The Giant Gusher will be next," said Harry, with a shiver.

The Bradys, with this idea in view, now began to make a close search of the vicinity.

And the result was an astounding discovery. In a thicket fully three hundred yards beyond the scene of the fire was found the melted section of a wire.

Following this up, the Bradys came upon a small battery placed in the ground.

The whole game was exposed.

The incendiary had made an electric connection with the oil tanks and exploded them, probably by means of dynamite.

The detectives were overwhelmed with the horror of the thing.

"My soul!" exclaimed Old King Brady, "this is the most fiendish work I ever heard of. No doubt a dozen lives were sacrificed in this dastardly scheme."

"We must locate the miscreant."

But the words were not out of Harry's mouth when a thrilling thing happened.

From the undergrowth behind them sprang a dozen men. They surrounded the detectives.

"We've got the fiends!" yelled Simpson, who was the leader of the party. "We'll make an example of them."

"Kill 'em! Hang 'em!"

These were the fierce cries of the excited miners.

## CHAPTER VII.

### A CHANGE OF SENTIMENT.

The Bradys were so surprised by this development that for a few moments they could not speak or act.

Then they recalled the fact that they were in disguise, and therefore objects of suspicion to the miners who did not know them.

It was possible that violence might have been done to them then and there, but Old King Brady acted.

He pulled off his false beard and revealed himself.

"Hold on, Simpson," he cried. "Don't make a mistake. You know me now."

"It's Small himself!" gasped the oil worker.

"Yes, it's me," said Old King Brady, "and I think we have found the clew to the blowing up of the tanks."

Simpson was an ignorant man, and, as is usual with ignorant people, inclined to prejudice.

"What's that?" he said, in surprise.

"We have found traces here of the fiends' work."

The old detective pointed to the electric battery and the wires. The oil workers crowded about in interest and wonderment.

Simpson knelt down and examined the connections.

His face grew dark.

He looked suspiciously at the detectives; then he stepped aside and addressed a few words to his colleagues in an undertone.

Harry saw the game at once.

"The fool!" he whispered to Old King Brady. "He suspects us."

The old detective smiled grimly.

"Oh, he does, eh?"

"Do you see?"

The old detective acted quickly. He stepped forward and said sharply:

"Men, I want you to take up this wire and battery and bring it to the office. If possible, I mean to find out who placed it here, and if I do that man's punishment will be severe."

Simpson still stood scowling at the ground.

The men stood sullen and indifferent at the command of their employer.

"Do you hear me?" said Old King Brady. "What ails you?"

At this the men moved slowly forward to obey.

Simpson, however, shot one searching glance at the Bradys, and started away.

"Where are you going, Simpson?" asked Old King Brady sharply.

"I am going back to town," replied the oil worker, doggedly.

"Aren't you going to help take up the wire?"

"No."

"You refuse?"

"I do."



"Then you are no longer in the employ of this company."

"All right. I don't want the job," retorted Simpson. "There is going to be a change in Beaumont before many days. The people are getting their eyes opened."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Old King Brady.

"I mean that the people of Beaumont are not fools. They know that the town is going to be wiped out."

"Then they should co-operate with me to prevent it."

Simpson's reply was inaudible, and he strode away.

The battery and wires were taken up. The Bradys then returned to the town. A scene of great excitement was there.

The denizens of Beaumont stood about in knots. There was an oppressive something in the air which the Bradys at once felt but were at a loss to understand.

They went to the hotel and removed their disguise. Then they sat down to discuss the event of the morning.

"I wonder if the people will pay heed to our warning now?" said Harry. "What if the big tower is blown up next?"

"We must do something," said Old King Brady, desperately.

For over an hour the Bradys discussed the matter and made deductions.

But they were yet in doubt and perplexity when an unexpected thing happened.

There was a dull roar from the outside, and then there came a rap on the door.

Harry opened the door.

One of the employees of the hotel stood before them.

"They want you outside, Mr. Small," he said.

"Who?" asked Old King Brady.

"The people."

The two detectives looked at each other in surprise; but they at once descended to the hotel porch.

They were surprised to see that the hotel was surrounded by excited men. They gave a yell of rage as the Bradys appeared.

"Give it to him, Simpson."

"We'll hang him if he's guilty!"

"Lynch him!"

"What is the meaning of this?" asked Old King Brady of the hotel proprietor.

"I don't know, sir, but I reckon the people think you had something to do with the blowing up of the big tanks."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Old King Brady hotly. "That is the work of that fool Simpson."

At this moment up the steps came four men, Simpson among them. One of them addressed the detectives.

"We are a citizens' committee," they said. "We demand an audience with you."

"Certainly," said Old King Brady. "State your wishes."

"Well," said the spokesman, "there are things you must explain to us."

"If they are reasonable I will do so."

"In the first place, you want us to move the town site."

"You are mistaken," said Old King Brady coolly. "I

don't care if you commit suicide. I only advised you your own good."

"There you are!" snapped Simpson. "He wants us move so that he can control all the land this side of the ridge. If we don't, then we will be burned up in oil."

Old King Brady fixed his keen eyes upon the fellow.

"That is a lie," he said, impressively.

"It is easy enough for you to say that," sneered Simpson. "Perhaps you can tell who blowed up the railroad tanks?"

"No, I cannot."

"Well, I think the most of us can guess."

"Can you?" said the old detective. "Do you mind giving me the information?"

"What's the use? You know yourself."

"I do not."

"Well, perhaps you can explain why you and your friend in disguise were found at the electric battery which blew up the tank?"

Old King Brady saw the point.

He laughed scornfully.

"You poor fool!" he exclaimed. "Do you think we blew up the tanks?"

"It looks against you."

"Well, you are an idiot! Why should I destroy my own property?"

"You are trying to drive us off this land."

Old King Brady was very angry. He saw what sort of an obstinate fellow he had to deal with.

"Simpson," he said sternly, "you are making a serious charge against me. Do you know that a dozen lives were lost in that explosion?"

"Yes, and all the worse for you."

"Take care! Do you think I would commit such a crime as that?"

"Facts speak for themselves."

"Well, you are a pig-headed fool! Now, I will tell you some plain facts. I have warned the people in this town in vain that they are in great danger in this valley."

"For a long time I have suspected that a secret gang has been at work trying to undermine the Giant Gusher."

"Secretly my friend and I have tried to detect the miscreants. We have used disguises in order to carry out our plans undetected. We have confined our efforts to the main shaft; we never suspected that harm was intended the railroad tanks."

"We discovered the traces of the work of the villains in the shape of the battery and the wire. You have made a clear fool of yourself, Simpson. It is up to you to make a handsome apology."

"Now, at once, an effort must be made to locate the tunnel which is intended to undermine the Gusher. This very day I shall put gangs at work driving pipes on the northern slope to find the tunnel."

"The purpose of the schemers must be thwarted or the Giant Gusher will be dynamited and the town of Beaumont wiped out off the map."



A murmur went up from the committee. Their faces changed.

"We couldn't believe you guilty, Mr. Small," said one of them.

"It is absurd," said Harry.

"Why didn't you tell us that at the first meeting?" napped Simpson.

"For a very good reason," replied Old King Brady. "The gang would have known that we had their secret and been in their guard."

"Now the whole thing is out. The gang is placed on their guard, thanks to your fool work, Mr. Simpson. It will be difficult to trap them. You will confer a great favor upon this community if you at once depart from it, never to return."

Simpson turned somewhat crestfallen though sullenly away. The committee showed their relief at once.

"But, Mr. Small," said one of them, "how are we assured of safety? May not the great calamity descend upon us at any moment?"

"There you are," declared Old King Brady. "Action should be taken at once. I would advise everybody to get out of the town—temporarily at least."

"Whose work do you think it is?"

"That we cannot say. Perhaps the design of a foe of mine for revenge, or maybe the jealousy of a rival oil company."

The committee now departed in a changed frame of mind.

The report went through the crowd, and there was a change of sentiment.

Old King Brady had carried the day.

But it was now the hasty desire of all to get from under the menacing peril. Instantly people began to move.

The town began to depopulate.

Tents were erected on the hillside, dugouts and cabins followed, and the oil workers moved their goods and chattels.

Only the empty dwellings were left. It was a wonderful transformation.

Beaumont in the valley became speedily Beaumont on the hill. Fearful eyes were cast at the great tower.

All work was suspended at the great oil well. A guard of armed men surrounded the place.

Old King Brady now put his men at work driving pipes on the other side of the ridge.

For several days they worked without result. Then one of the pipes reached an underground cavity.

Instantly a steam shovel was mounted, and work of excavation begun. In a few hours a shaft was sunk.

And there was found the evidence of the work of the destroying fiends. A passage had been mined to within one hundred feet of the main shaft of the Gusher.

Fifty feet more and a charge of dynamite would have wrecked the entire plant and set free the flood of burning oil to destroy the town below.

As men stood on the brink of the pit and realized the enormity of the thing their blood ran cold.

It was a horrible thought.

No trace of the gang could be found. The passage led to an opening in the bank of a creek many hundred yards away. This was screened by a growth of mesquite.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### AN UNEXPECTED MESSAGE.

It is hardly necessary to say that there was a great revulsion of feeling in Beaumont.

Sympathy was now wholly with Stanley Small. Suspicion was dead.

But now it was in order to find and, if possible, hang the fiends who were responsible for this awful plot.

But this was not easy.

It was safe to say that they were at that moment commingled with the oil workers and listening to the anathemas hurled at them.

The plot against the Giant Gusher for a time paralyzed industry in the place.

It was necessary to move the town site, and the houses were taken down and moved to higher ground.

Work was begun on the railroad and the station.

It would require some time to rehabilitate the place. The Bradys in the meanwhile were on the alert.

They groped in vain for a clew.

And while thus engaged, once again Old King Brady was made conscious of the disadvantage of filling the shoes of a man who was hunted for his life.

One day a man rode into the town and called at the new hotel on the hill.

"Does Mr. Stanley Small stop here?" he asked at the door.

Receiving an affirmative reply, he gave a card to a servant.

"Take this to his room," he said.

Old King Brady and Harry were just on the point of going out. The old detective glanced at the card.

"James Ray, New York City," he read.

"What is this?" exclaimed the old detective in a puzzled way.

"Who is he?"

"That is the question."

The old detective turned to the waiter and said:

"Show him up."

A few moments later James Ray stood before the Bradys. He was of rather slight figure, dark complexion, and possessed of curious shifting brown eyes.

"I am from New York," he said.

"Yes," replied Old King Brady. "In what manner can we serve you?"

"Is this a safe place for a secret and important consultation?"

"I believe it is."

Ray looked about him furtively. Then he drew a letter from his pocket.



"This is for you," he said.

Old King Brady took the missive. He glanced at it and gave a start. Its contents were a surprising revelation.

Thus it read:

"Dear Sir:—You will understand who this is from when I mention Room No. —, Fifth Avenue Hotel. Since you left New York I have waited and watched with interest for the result of your trip. Some startling reports have come to my hearing. There has been a systematic attempt in Wall Street to bear the stock of the Giant Gusher. Mr. Bradcombe has told me some strange things. Yesterday Gusher went down twenty points on the report of the explosion at the railroad.

"We may be sure some secret and powerful influence is at work to force Gusher stock down to nothing and ruin me. The bearer of this, Mr. Ray, is very trustworthy. You may confide in him any message to me that you may choose.

"When you receive this I shall be at Port Tesauo, only twenty miles from you. I could bear it no longer, and am sure no harm can come from my proximity. I think I can assist you much with advice. In some manner we must overcome the subtle and secret schemer who is working against my fortune and my life.

"You may send me any message you choose by Mr. Ray. Will it be safe for me to venture down to Beaumont. I am anxious to be on the spot. Yours, anxiously,

"JULIEN LANE."

Old King Brady crumpled this letter in his hand and frowned.

He was certainly surprised and somewhat chagrined at this action on the part of the oil magnate.

It seemed ill-advised, even foolhardy.

Harry ventured to say:

"I fear trouble will come from this."

"What report am I to make to Mr. Lane?" asked Ray.

"Simply this," said Old King Brady. "Bid him lie low and wait."

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

The messenger bowed.

"I will carry the word," he said. "I can see you are not pleased with the action of Mr. Lane."

"Well, he is his own master," said Old King Brady; "but in our opinion he would have done better to have remained in New York."

Ray gave the detective an odd look.

"Do you advise his return?"

"That he must judge for himself."

Ray bowed and left the room. As he went out he said:

"You will see me again in a day or two."

After he had gone the Bradys sat silently looking at each other.

"What do you make of it?" asked Harry.

"We are going to lose."

"To lose?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean?"

"This rash action of Small's will beat us. The gang will locate him. The secret assassin will be on his trail again."

"Have you noted one fact?"

"What?"

"The unknown assassin has not been on your trail since we have been in the town. Not since the attempt on the train has he showed his hand."

"The shot I received on the hillside——"

"Oh, that may have come from the gang who were undermining the Gusher."

Old King Brady saw Harry's point.

"You do not believe that the assassin is concerned in the attack on the Gusher?"

"No."

"Well, I had thought of that. It looks to me as if the effort to undermine the Gusher is the work of financial schemers who hope to force the stock down in Wall Street."

"And they have succeeded to an extent."

"So they have."

"We care not so much about them as we do the secret assassin."

"Altogether it is the most baffling of all mysteries."

"So it is. We are in the dark. We have absolutely no clue."

The detectives paced the floor. Suddenly Old King Brady exclaimed with startling force:

"If the assassin has left my track he has certainly gone back on the old scent, and Small is in greater danger than ever."

The detectives were worried.

They went out and walked slowly up the hill to the oil well.

Workmen were busy putting the shaft in order so as to resume the output as early a day as possible.

The detectives walked around the big tower and watched the men. Just then a boy came running up to them.

He handed Old King Brady a message.

Thus it read:

"To Stanley Small, Dear Sir:—I am sure I have got the den of the oil gang located. I am at Cooley's Ranch. Ride out this evening at ten o'clock. I will meet you there and we will do some detective work. Yours, for justice,

"ELIAS SIMPSON."

"Simpson!" exclaimed Harry, eagerly. "He has done well. I fancy he writes the truth."

Old King Brady's face lit up.

"Simpson is a brick," he declared. "We will be there on time."

The Bradys went back to the hotel. They dressed for the ride and engaged a couple of mustangs.

It was twelve miles to Cooley's Ranch. This meant an hour and a half of sharp riding.

So the Bradys left Beaumont as early as possible.

They swung away across the prairie at a sharp gallop.



The moon came up and showered silver radiance on the plain. It was like a ride in fairyland.

Cooley's was situated in a sort of coulee, where the plain rolled and brought one into the depression with its jutting sides quite unexpectedly.

The trail led along the base of the cut, and as the detectives rode on suddenly a startling thing happened.

The sharp report of a rifle rang out.

Crack! Crack!

The bullets cut close to Old King Brady's ear. Almost instantly the old detective slid from the saddle, and dragged himself flat on his stomach into the prairie grass.

Harry did the same.

The ponies dashed madly on toward the ranch. Only this rare presence of mind had saved the Bradys.

Crack! Crack!

The bullets flew like hail over them. Old King Brady pulled his revolvers and answered them.

He could only fire at random.

As near as possible, he located the foe in a cleft of the coulee. Shot after shot the Bradys poured into the place.

The foe had ceased firing.

But the detectives were not to be deceived.

They were too old in the ways of the plains.

They did not venture to forsake their position for an hour.

Then the sound of galloping horses was heard. Along the trail came half a dozen cowboys.

"Hello!" was the cry they gave at intervals. "Anybody in trouble?"

"We're all right now, Harry!" cried Old King Brady, rising to his feet. Then he shouted back:

"Hello! Here we are!"

A moment later the cowboys pulled rein before them. The foremost, who was Cooley, the ranchman, himself, cried:

"What's the matter, friends? Did ye run into the Apaches?"

"I don't know," replied Old King Brady. "Somebody over yonder tried to drop us."

"We reckoned ye'd need help, so we came out as quick as we could."

"How did you know about it?"

"Yer ponies came in, an' we knew what it meant."

"You are very kind, Mr. Cooley, said Old King Brady.

"I see you have the ponies there."

"Yes; we brought them back to ye."

"I hope we may return the kindness some day."

"Oh, that's all right. Don't ye know who tackled ye?"

"No."

"Thet's durned queer. There has been a dirty gang of Apaches around here for a few days past."

"It may have been them."

"Which way was ye riding?"

"To your ranch."

"Is that so? Waal, come along with us, then. We'll find somethin' warm ter drink."

Cooley was the most popular ranchman in that part of Texas. He was known for his free heart and urbane ways.

The detectives mounted and rode on with Cooley and his men.

"We have an appointment to meet a friend at your ranch at ten o'clock," said Old King Brady.

"Is thet so?" remarked Cooley.

"Yes. Perhaps you know Elias Simpson?"

"Elias? Oh, yes! I know him well. He hasn't showed up at the ranch yet."

The Bradys were surprised.

"He is not there?"

"No."

The same thought struck the Bradys at that moment.

## CHAPTER IX.

### A SURPRISE.

Instinctively Harry exclaimed:

"A trap!"

They exchanged glances.

"Oh, mebbe he'll be there when we get back," said Cooley.

Into the coulee they rode twenty minutes later. The men dismounted in the ranch yard.

"Come in," said Cooley. "Ye can't go back to Beaumont to-night."

The Bradys entered the ranch.

It was akin to all structures of the kind, made in part of adobe brick with wide portico.

It was long after ten, and Simpson had not appeared.

Nor did he appear that night.

All doubt was settled in the minds of the Bradys.

It was a dastardly trap.

Their escape had been quite miraculous; but again they were puzzled.

Was it the work of the secret assassin or the oil gang? This was a question not easy to answer.

Early the next morning the Bradys were astir. As they came out into the yard they met Cooley.

"Yer friend didn't get around as ye expected," said the ranchman.

"No," said Old King Brady. "I can hardly understand it."

Just at that moment a cowboy came galloping into the yard.

He was much excited.

Leaping from his horse he strode up.

"Be you the pilgrims as come here to meet Elias Simpson?" he asked.

"We are," replied Old King Brady.

"Waal, he miscarried on the way. Ye'll find his carcass a mile out here on the White Creek trail. He's shot full of holes."

The Bradys were stunned.

They gasped and looked at each other. Cooley was hardly less shocked.



"See here, Tim Briscole," he cried, "air ye tellin' the truth?"

"Go out an' see fer yourself."

"It is the work of the oil gang," exclaimed Harry, in a dazed way. "They meant to kill us, too."

"You are right."

Cooley had called for mustangs.

In a few moments the ranchman and the detectives were in the saddle and riding for White Creek.

It did not take two minutes and half to cover that mile. Briscole had told the truth.

On his back lay Simpson, with white, rigid features upturned to the sky. There was a terrible bullet wound in his side.

That it was murder there was no sort of doubt.

Old King Brady bent down over the murdered oil worker. He made a swift examination of him.

"He was shot from his horse," he said.

"It is the work of the Apaches," declared Cooley. "You can bet on it."

Old King Brady, of course, did not agree with this.

But he said nothing.

He proceeded to make a search of the dead man's pockets. He found that they had not been rifled.

This was almost proof positive that it was not the work of Indians.

They would have stripped the body.

In an inner pocket Old King Brady found a letter. In the hope that it might afford a clew, he looked at it.

And he was right.

It did afford a clew.

The old detective read it, and was afforded a most astonishing revelation.

Thus it read:

"To Elias Simpson, Dear Sir:—I know you are as anxious as I am to track down the guilty members of the oil gang. Now, I have a clew which I am sure will lead to their conviction. If you will meet me at Cooley's Ranch to-night at ten o'clock, we can bring this end about. I need your assistance. Be sure and come. Yours,

"STANLEY SMALL."

This was the decoy which led the Bradys into the same trap.

But poor Simpson had fallen a victim to the game.

Here was proof positive that Simpson had not written the letter of appointment. The Bradys explained all to Cooley.

The ranchman was horrified.

"That is awful!" he declared. "Who are these chaps? Can't ye get no clew?"

"We've done our best."

"Now, look here! We've got a feller up at the ranch who can trail anything. S'posin' I bring him down here?"

The Bradys were skeptical.

But Old King Brady said:

"Very well. It will do no harm."

Back to the ranch galloped Cooley. When he returned he had a dark, swarthy fellow with him.

"Now, Juan," he said, "put your nose to it and lead us to the game."

The fellow grinned and muttered a reply in the Mexican tongue.

He made a circuit of the dead man.

Then he looked at the sky and the ground. He bent down and studied the grass, and sifted the soil in his fingers.

For fully ten minutes he searched thus. Then he gave a grunt of satisfaction.

He pointed eastward.

"Caramba!" he exclaimed. "Four men. All go that way."

"Good for you, Juan!" cried Cooley. "Let's go after 'em."

The Mexican bent his gaze to the ground. The Bradys could see no sign of a trail.

But the Mexican evidently did, for he set off to the eastward at a dog trot.

Thus he kept on for miles. This led them toward Beaumont.

The detectives and Cooley pressed on with the trailer leading their horses.

Several times Juan came to a halt; but he soon hit the trail again.

They were now three miles from the town. They had traveled nine miles.

It was near the hour of noon.

Suddenly over a swell in the prairie came a couple of horsemen. They were coming from the south.

Their course was toward Beaumont.

Juan paused and glanced toward them. Then he shook his head, and again took to the trail.

On he went at a jog. The course would lead them across the path of the oncoming horsemen.

Suddenly Harry gave a start.

"On my word, partner," he exclaimed, "do you know those men?"

Old King Brady rubbed his eyes.

"As I live," he exclaimed, "one of them is James Ray."

"And the other?"

"Mercy! It is Stanley Small."

The Bradys were aghast. All this had been spoken in an undertone.

But the surprise of the detectives was so great that they were at a loss what to do or say.

The appearance of Small on the scene quite disconcerted them.

They knew the risk incurred.

If Small's disguise should be penetrated then all their efforts would have been in vain.

It was not encouraging.

Every moment the horsemen drew nearer. When in speaking distance Small suddenly rose in his stirrups and shouted recognition.

The Bradys were disgusted.

They made wry faces.



But there was no other way out of it, so they pulled up their horses and saluted the oil magnate in return.

"Is that you, Mr. Lane?" cried Old King Brady, with a sort of comprehensive gesture. Fortunately Small took the hint.

"Yes, it is, Mr. Small," he replied. "This is a real pleasure."

"Indeed, it is; but what has brought a man of leisure like you into this arduous region?"

Small looked hard at Old King Brady. He would have been blind indeed if he had not seen the disapprobation there.

Small's face fell.

He glanced at Cooley. Then he said:

"Love of adventure, my dear friend; but you are having some sort of sport. What game are you trailing?"

"Human game."

Small gave a great start. For a moment a livid hue suffused his face.

"Eh?" he exclaimed. "Are you serious?"

"Yes."

"I am interested. Horse thieves, I suppose?"

"No; murderers and incendiaries."

"Do you mean the villains who set fire to the oil cars?"

"Yes."

"That settles it. Let me join you. I shall be glad to do something to help that good cause along."

"Very well."

Once again Juan went forward on the trail. Small and Ray dismounted and joined the party.

Just before reaching Beaumont the trail diverged.

Just ahead was a house and a miserable dugout used as a stable. The trail led right toward this.

"Hello!" exclaimed Cooley. "That's queer. They visited Mother Bender."

"Mother Bender?" exclaimed Harry.

"Yes. She is an old fortune teller who travels around the country at times. Let us see what she has to say."

"You are sure the trail leads here?"

"I'll ask Juan."

The Mexican was emphatic in his assertion. He went right up to Mother Bender's door. There he halted.

"Men here," he said. "Caramba! I can scent them."

Juan, you're a brick," cried Cooley. "You can bet, gentlemen, he is right."

Cooley went up to the cabin door. He pounded on it violently.

Not for some while was there an answer. Then the door opened a crack.

It framed a visage as repulsive as the Bradys ever saw.

A leering hag, with bleary eyes and protruding fangs, gave them an insolent stare. In a whining voice she demanded:

"What do ye want? I'm only an honest woman."

"Yes, I know, Mother," declared Cooley; "but if you don't tell us the truth we'll hang ye up to your ridge pole."

The hag's bleared eyes blazed.

"Ugh!" she said, stiffly. "What do ye want?"

"Where are the four men who have come here?"

She looked blank.

"None have come."

"Here, don't you lie to me," cried Cooley. "I know they have. Now, out with it! Where are they?"

She grinned until her toothless mouth looked a cavern.

"Oh, I know," she said. "They have gone."

"No, they haven't," cried Cooley. "If you lie to me again I'll burn your home and you in it."

With this he lit a match and held it to the thatch of the cabin. The old hag gave a wild, snarling cry.

"Curse ye!" she yelled. "The fiends shall take ye! Don't ye burn it! I'll curse ye forever!"

Cooley paused.

"Well," he said, in a voice of steel, "where are they?"

"They have gone."

"Gone?"

"I said so."

"Where, and in what direction?"

Mother Bender pointed south; but Cooley knew this was a lie.

"Up goes the house!" he declared, lighting another match. Again Mother Bender flew at him.

"No, no!" she screamed. "I'll tell all. They have gone to Beaumont!"

## CHAPTER X.

### THE SPANIARD.

Cooley winked at the Bradys.

His method had brought the old dame to terms; but he was not done.

"What did they look like?"

"I know not, for they all wore masks," declared Mother Bender.

Now Juan began to search for a trail supposed to lead to Beaumont; but singularly he could not find it.

"If there is such a trail he'll find it," declared Cooley. "I'll stake my life on it."

"Then we are to assume that this old woman is telling us a falsehood?" asked Old King Brady.

"It must be so."

"Can we compel her to tell the truth?"

"I don't see how."

"Nor I. I believe it would be a good plan to search her cabin."

"Very well. We will do so."

It did not take long to carry out this plan. The cabin was closely searched.

But nothing was found.

The beldame stood by muttering angry threats and making jeering remarks.

"Well," she sneered, "what did ye make out of it? I'll have the law on ye! Ye're a lot of robbers!"

Cooley now leaped onto his horse's back.



"I'm sorry, Mr. Small," he cried, "but this is as far as I can go. I have duties at the ranch."

"I am certainly obliged to you for what you have done," declared Old King Brady.

"If I were you," said Cooley, "I'd organize Vigilantes and track the gang down. If you don't they'll wipe Beaumont off the map."

"It shall be done."

"Well, good-day, and good luck to ye."

Cooley and his man Juan galloped away. The Bradys were left with Small and Ray in Mother Bender's yard.

"Well," said the oil magnate, anxiously, "you have had bad luck, Mr. Brady."

"Yes," replied the old detective; "but I think we shall win out."

"That explosion of the oil tanks gave me a great shock."

"You would have had a greater one if we had not discovered the mine under the Giant Gusher."

Mr. Small shivered.

"It is awful," he said. "Strange that this deadly foe remains so intangible."

"He is shrewd."

"Have you suffered an attack from him?" asked the magnate eagerly. "You know I have had no word from you since you left New York."

Old King Brady then detailed their adventures since leaving New York.

Mr. Small listened eagerly and with interest.

"Do you think it rash in me in coming here?" he asked.

"Well," said Old King Brady, "of course there is a risk. I would advise you to use the greatest of care."

"I shall do that."

"Will you venture to Beaumont?"

"That is my desire."

The Bradys were not well pleased with this plan; but Small seemed quite determined to accompany them.

They now set forth at a swinging gallop. It did not take long to ride into Beaumont.

When they rode up to the new hotel they gave their ponies to waiting peons; then they entered the hotel.

By the door as they entered stood a slender, dark-featured man.

His type was that of the Spaniard.

He cast a swift, searching glance at the four men; then an odd light shone in his dark eyes. He twirled a bit of cane in his fingers.

His gaze seemed fixed on the face of Small. As the disguised magnate went up to the desk to register the Spaniard was close behind him.

When he wrote his name he continued to push up close enough to read it over his shoulder.

"Julien Lane, New York City," he read.

The Spaniard coolly took a cheroot from his pocket and lit it.

He twirled his long mustache and coolly blew a cloud of smoke across the face of the oil magnate.

Small turned quickly.

As his gaze caught the Spaniard's every vestige of color left his face, and he reeled back like a drunken man.

He clutched at the counter, and his eyes seemed starting from their sockets.

The Bradys were astonished.

"Enrique Velasco!" gasped the oil magnate thickly. "You—here!"

The Spaniard's face underwent a curious series of expressions.

He flicked the ashes from his cheroot in well-assumed indifference. There was a shade of annoyance in his manner.

"You have the advantage of me, senior," he said, in a soft voice.

In that moment Small saw his mistake. He could have kicked himself.

He recovered himself as well as he was able, and with forced politeness he said:

"Pardon me. You greatly resemble an old acquaintance who is dead."

"It is of no moment," said Velasco, in a cool manner. "Such mistakes are common."

He looked keenly at Small. Then he drew a card from his pocket.

"It is singular, but my name is your friend's. Can there be a mistake?"

Small took the card. On it was printed the name:

DON ENRIQUE DI VELASCO.

The position in which the magnate was placed was not an easy one.

All the horror, all the hatred of his being for the man believed to be the murderer of his relatives rose within his bosom almost to suffocation.

He knew that it was his part to play the game shrewdly.

But standing here in the presence of his deadly foe his nerve forsook him.

He could not act, he could not simulate, and he could not conceal himself.

All he could do was to stare fixedly at him with the same horrible sensation of fascination which one feels for the deadly cobra.

The Spaniard was as self-possessed and ingenuous as his training could demand.

He coolly looked his victim over as if nothing was the matter. He affected not to notice the emotion of Small.

The Bradys, stupefied by the development, stood by silent spectators.

"Well," said Velasco finally, "you still have the advantage of me, senior."

Like one coming out of a spell Small pulled himself together and said:

"Pardon me. I have no card. My name is Julien Lane."

Very politely the Spaniard bowed.

He lit a fresh cigarette.

"I am interested, Senior Lane," he said. "Did your friend, then, so much resemble me? I once heard that I had a double."



"Yes," replied Small, in a more natural way, and catching Old King Brady's gaze. "The likeness is very striking. It gave me a shock, for I believed him dead."

"Quite interesting, really. Pray accept a cheroot, Senor Small. Do I detain you?"

"My friends——"

"Ah! I perceive. Glad to have met you, senor. I may see you again. I am interested in this double of mine, whom you say is dead. The name was the same, too."

"Yes, the very same."

"It could not possibly be me?"

"I can hardly believe it. Don Enrique had a daughter named Inez."

"The very same."

"She was strangely murdered."

"Ah! That was not my daughter Inez. It was my sister. Her father, also Don Enrique di Velasco, lived in the City of Mexico. My sister was loved by a rich American. When he refused him he foully murdered her."

"Wrong!" declared Small hotly. "She was murdered by Pedro Alvarez."

Di Velasco turned like a flash.

His burning eyes pierced Small through and through.

"Who are you to tell me this?" he demanded.

Small was for a moment nonplussed, but he quickly recovered.

"The American was my friend," he said. "His name was Small."

"Si, senor."

"I know that he was not guilty. He told me the whole story."

"Then he spoke falsely."

"Pardon me. He spoke the truth. Since then there has been a terrible vendetta enacted. If you are responsible for it may God have mercy on your soul!"

Di Velasco smiled in a bitter way.

"It is the punishment of Fate," he said. "Di Velasco cannot alter that."

"Stanley Small is the only one of the family left. His death has been attempted."

"And he will die."

"He is my friend, and he stands here at this moment."

Di Velasco glanced at Old King Brady and smiled. He said lightly:

"It is Fate's decree! I must some day die myself."

"You are wrong in your charge against my grandfather," declared Small. "He was not guilty of that crime."

"Your grandfather?" exclaimed the shrewd Don Enrique. "Was he also your grandfather?"

Small saw that he was playing a thin game. He knew that Velasco had penetrated his disguise with ease.

So he threw off the mask.

"Yes," he said. "He was my grandfather."

"But your name is Lane."

"Yes, for certain purposes."

"Oh, I see. You are masquerading. You fear something. Is not this gentleman Mr. Stanley Small?"

"No," replied Small bluntly. "I am Stanley Small. We

may as well come out in our true colors, Velasco. He is a friend who has taken my name and character to mislead the secret assassin who pursues me. Now, Velasco, you know that it is of no use to beat about the bush further. I know you and your purpose."

The Spaniard flung away his cigarette.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"I know that you seek my life."

"I seek your life?"

"Yes."

Di Velasco affected astonishment.

"You are mad," he said. "Can you prove that allegation?"

Small was silent.

It could not be proved that Di Velasco had killed with his own hand Joseph Small or any other member of the family.

Di Velasco could walk the streets of Beaumont with impunity.

He could snap his fingers in the face of the law.

Although Small knew him to be guilty he had no redress. There was no evidence.

"Velasco," said the magnate, "you killed my brother."

The Spaniard threw up his hands.

"I killed your brother!" he exclaimed, contemptuously. "Now you are mad."

"What has brought you here?"

"It is a flourishing community. I seek new scenes."

"You are a hardened villain, Velasco!" cried Small. "You have murdered every relative I have, and now you seek my life. Don't lie! You know it is true. To be sure, I cannot prove it; but I mean to see you hung."

The two men faced each other.

Small, pale and accusing, the Mexican, evil and smilingly defiant. The Bradys were intent witnesses.

Di Velasco blew a thin wreath of smoke from his nostrils as he lit another cheroot. Then he laughed in a chuckling way.

"Go ahead, my friend. Di Velasco is not the worm you think him. Do your worst. I defy you and your American courts. I laugh you to scorn."

## CHAPTER XI.

### THE MAGICIAN.

This was more than Small could stand. His quivering figure suddenly shot forward. His heavy fist fell upon the Mexican's face.

Di Velasco went down like a feather before a draught of air.

But he was on his feet almost in the same moment. His eyes were lurid in their black hate.

It looked for a moment as if he would leap upon Small like a panther, but he did not.

With an effort he controlled himself. He turned and picked up his hat.



Then he made a sweeping bow. There was a devilish light in his eyes, as he said:

"Adios, señor! If there has never been a score between us there is one now. A Di Velasco never forgets."

He coolly walked out to the porch, and in a moment, as unruffled as ever, lit a fresh cigarette.

Small, trembling and ashen pale, stood helplessly before the Bradys.

"My God!" he said, huskily. "What am I to do? I know the murderer of my brother stands there, but I am helpless."

Old King Brady drew a deep breath.

"There is only one thing that can be done now," he said.

"What?"

"Go to the room and change disguises."

"Oh, I see my folly now. You are right. I have ruined everything by coming here."

The Bradys led the way to their room.

Then Old King Brady removed his clever disguise. He was no longer the oil magnate who held sway in Beaumont.

Small took off his disguise and became once more himself.

He kept reproaching himself.

"Oh, what a fool I have been," he moaned. "I can see it all now. You had the plans well laid. You would have trapped this fellow."

"I think we should," agreed Old King Brady.

"And I have spoiled it all."

"Well," said the old detective, "there is no use bemoaning the fact. We must get together and make up the loss."

"How can it be done?"

"Of course it will be difficult. There is a strong hand needed in Beaumont just now."

"And I am so weak."

"Yet you must take it."

"And you——"

"We will have to work openly. We will certainly do the best we can. I trust we may meet with success."

"Di Velasco can play an open hand here."

"Yes; and it looks as if that was his purpose," declared Harry.

Stanley Small was quite overcome. He paced the floor like one insane.

"What a fool I have been," he declared. "If I had only remained in New York all would have been easy for you."

The Bradys now proceeded to acquaint the oil magnate with the state of affairs in the town.

When they had finished Small said:

"I am going to wire Bradcombe to sell every share of stock I own in the oil wells."

"You are?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

"I am sick of it all. Then I shall take the first steamer for Europe. I am going to the farthest ends of the earth. If Di Velasco follows me it will be man against man, and I will kill him on sight."

The Bradys were silent.

After Small had thus freed his mind he finally turned and asked:

"What do you think of it?"

"Shall I tell you?" asked Old King Brady.

"Yes."

"Well, I think it would be folly."

"Pshaw! You don't mean it!"

"I do."

"Well, what am I to do?"

"For the present remain very closely in this hotel. Let the rest to us."

"What will you do?"

"We shall try and get sight of Velasco again. Then we will never lose sight of him."

"Do you think that easy? I will tell you that he is a fleeting mist. When you think him in your grasp he melts into thin air."

The Bradys managed finally to induce the oil magnate to follow their plans. He agreed to remain in the hotel for a few hours.

"We will send you word the moment we locate Velasco," they said. "After that go and come as freely as you choose. Know that we shall not let him out of our sight."

With this they took their leave.

Small's valet, Ray, remained with him. The Bradys went downstairs.

Nobody knew them, now that their disguises had been removed. They mingled with the crowd.

Di Velasco was no longer in the hotel.

Inquiry at the desk elicited the reply:

"He left here not half an hour since. He has taken the train for San Antonio."

The Bradys went down to the depot.

Inquiry there, however, failed to confirm the story. Velasco had not been seen to leave on the train.

"He is yet in the town," said Old King Brady. "He is a man of slippery methods. Doubtless he is hanging about somewhere in disguise."

"That is the idea."

"If we are smart enough, we will locate him."

"The chance is not bright."

"No; but there is one consolation."

"What?"

"Nobody knows us in our present dress. We can play an entirely new game."

The Bradys went back to the hotel. They stood on the piazza watching the people as they passed.

Suddenly a man walked out of the office and stood beside them. He was of an appearance which would have attracted attention anywhere.

He was dressed in dark broadcloth. His trousers were tightly cut to conform to his shapely legs. His coat was of the frock pattern and very long. His vest was flowered and his shirt ruffled in quaint style.

He wore a silk hat and patent leather shoes. A flashy black tie gave relief to his deep cravat.

Altogether his dress was in the sharpest possible



st to that of the oil workers and the loungers about the tel.

The man's face was lean and thin. His eyes quick and stless.

His chin was pointed, and a long mustache curled nearly his ears. He advanced and stood near the Bradys.

The detectives noted him at once.

For some reason they were instantly interested in him.

Old King Brady exchanged glances with Harry. The ry thing the detective wished for now happened.

The fellow rested his gaze on them, hesitated a moment, d then walked forward.

"Pardon me," he said. "Are you natives of the place?"

"We are not," replied Harry.

"I thought not. You do not bear the stamp. I am a ranger here myself."

"We share the distinction."

"You may, however, know something about the town and e people?"

"What do you desire to know?"

"I am a legerdemain artist and magician. I want to give i entertainment here to-night. Are the oil people kindly sposed toward show people?"

The detectives were surprised at the question. It seemed usual.

"So far as we know, they are."

"I can assure you that I know my business well. I am a pnotist, and a master of the art of mind reading. Ah, doubt you are incredulous. I shall prove my words to you night."

A sudden, swift thought came to Old King Brady.

The old detective saw great possibilities.

"Look here, my friend," he said. "Perhaps if you have l those gifts you can assist us."

The hypnotist smiled and bowed.

"I shall be pleased," he said.

"We are detectives from New York City looking for a ted murderer in this place."

The magician gave a start.

"In what manner can I help you?"

"You will draw a large crowd to your performance. Perps our man may be there. If possible locate him for "

The magician held out his hand.

"I will grant that," he cried. "In return you will assist e?"

"How?"

"I shall have need of co-operation on the stage. If you ll join me in the enterprise—perhaps assume the manager-l part, as it were——"

"It is done."

"My card."

The Bradys took the card, and read:

MR. JANS VARLEY, Magician.

They shook hands with their new acquaintance. Then atters were discussed.

Varley proved a bright man.

He showed the detectives a number of bewildering feats. The Bradys knew that these would take well with the oil workers.

"It's all right," declared Harry. "We will make things boom."

"I hope so."

Quickly plans were made. There was no theatre or public hall in the town.

But the great storeroom at the oil works made a fine place for a show. It was easy for the Bradys to secure this.

Very conveniently Varley carried his own printing. Posters with his lithograph were placed everywhere. Soon all the townspeople had heard of the magician.

Stanley Small was deeply interested in the project, for the Bradys explained it to him.

"You may be sure the oil gang will be present," declared the magnate. "And if they are you have got them solid."

When evening came a large crowd turned out to see Varley, the magician.

It was seldom that the oil workers were favored with such a treat. They could not afford to miss it.

Harry presided at the door.

Old King Brady took charge of affairs inside the hall. A rude stage had been built at one end.

Varley had his trunk behind the curtain, with all of his properties. He was now ready for the exhibition.

The oil men came in gangs. They filled the place to overflowing.

A couple of local violinists made up the orchestra. As soon as they had played a few selections the show began.

The magician began with various sleight-of-hand tricks.

He was exceedingly clever in these, and won great applause. The rough miners were highly entertained.

All the while the magician was sizing up his audience.

Not a man in the place escaped his quiet scrutiny.

After the sleight-of-hand, which was the first part of the entertainment, was over he retired behind the curtain.

The violinists began a symphony, Old King Brady waiting behind the scenes.

"Well," said the magician astutely, "I think I have located a number of your men."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"That is good," cried Old King Brady eagerly. "Can you point them out to me?"

"Come here."

There was a small hole in the curtain. Through this Old King Brady peered.

"Now," said the magician, "do you see a fellow back there in the fifth row and fourth man from the end?"

Old King Brady located this man.

As he did so he gave a thrilled start. It was no other than Enrique di Velasco.

## CHAPTER XII.

### THE CONFESSION.

The Spaniard was smoking a cheroot in his usual cool manner.



"I see him," said Old King Brady, joyfully; "and he is my man!"

"Good!" said Varley. "Now you will see what I will do with him. Two rows back are four more men whom I believe are of the oil gang."

Old King Brady located them.

He studied their faces carefully.

"How do you fix them?" he asked.

"By a curious sort of instinct which I cannot explain. It is a power given me, as I believe, by the Almighty. Again, they are cynical and not enthusiastic. This would be characteristic of men under a ban or with heavy consciences."

Old King Brady was impressed.

"Varley," he said, "you are a wonder. You ought to be a detective."

"No; I am a simple magician."

"Well, I feel sure you are right as regards those fellows. We will keep a close watch on them."

"I think they are worthy of suspicion. Now comes my hypnotic exhibition. Watch me carefully."

The violinists had finished their airs. The magician once again stepped forth. He was greeted with applause.

"Gentlemen," he said, smoothly, "I now bring you to the second part of my programme of entertainment. I have demonstrated to you my humble power as a magician. Now, I will give you some illustration of my ability as a hypnotist."

"Hypnotism is a faculty possessed by but few and understood by few. Many possess the gift without knowing it. I have heard it argued that hypnotism is simply personal magnetism. If it is, then it is magnetism of the highest order."

"I shall ask the privilege of exercising the power I possess upon certain members of this good company whom I may select at random. I trust those I select will accept their fate in all good nature, and those I do not select will feel no slight, or that I have made discrimination. Now, to begin:

"First I will run my eye over the audience. Now among you I shall find one person. That person shall be made to obey my every request so long as I hold him under my influence. This is distant work. I do not touch my subject, nor is there any trick. It is purely the superior force of will. Now!"

For some moments the hypnotist stood silently running his eye over the audience.

Those who have faced a master of this art will understand the curious thrill which ran through the company present.

Rough men they were, and able to understand but little of this sort of science.

Slowly Varley turned his head and fixed his dilated eyes upon Velasco.

The Spaniard saw it coming, and half arose; but he was too late.

The hypnotist had him. Slowly he sank back into his seat. He was then dead to the world.

"There is a person in this audience upon whom I have

focussed my power," said the magician. "He will act what so will it. In a few moments he will be absolutely under my control."

Silence most profound was upon the audience. nerves of all were keyed to the highest tension.

Then slowly the Spaniard rose from his seat. Like on a dream he walked down the aisle to the stage.

The hypnotist's eyes were fixed upon him.

Up onto the stage he crept. The crowd, agape with excitement, watched.

"Sit down on the floor," commanded the hypnotist. "Turn a somersault."

This was done. The face of Velasco was white and expressionless. He was thoroughly under the wizard's spell.

"Stand up," he commanded. "Now face the audience and tell them the story of the murder you committed in Banker Bradcombe's office in New York City."

There was a stir in the audience. Four men in the front row arose to go out.

But the hypnotist turned his gaze in that direction.

"Sit down!" he commanded. "I want you later."

The crowd was unable to understand all this. Old King Brady stepped from behind the scenes.

Now Varley raised his hand and made a pass slowly over the Spaniard's face. The latter quivered, and then walked rolled from his white lips.

And while the crowd of rough oil workers listened aghast, the full confession of Joseph Small's murder was given.

More than this, the villain named his associates, and confessed that they were under his orders to blow up the Giant Gusher.

He declared that he was bearing the stock in Wall Street and hoped to acquire the property. That it was his purpose to murder Stanley Small at the first opportunity.

All this the powerful will of the hypnotist drew from him.

Before that mighty crowd of witnesses the mystery of the Giant Gusher was given out, and Enrique di Velasco stood self-condemned.

It was a thrilling and tragic climax to an evening of entertainment. The oil workers were stupefied.

Now, however, Old King Brady walked down the stage and said:

"Gentlemen, I have to introduce myself as Old King Brady, a New York detective. I and my partner are here in Beaumont for the purpose of arresting and convicting the murderer of Joseph Small."

"We have employed this method of obtaining evidence against him. Here before you stands the guilty man."

Then a loud roar went up.

"Lynch him!"

"Give him a short rope!"

"Take him out!"

But Old King Brady held up his hand.

"Do not be hasty," he said. "He belongs to the State of New York. Full justice will be done him there."

"But I have to say that from to-day life and property will be safe in Beaumont. The ringleader of the oil gang



prisoner. The other members of that gang are in this hall. They cannot escape."

In an instant the whole audience was on its feet. They were almost beyond control. It was with the utmost difficulty that Harry and Old King Brady kept them from rushing onto the stage.

This proved fatal to Varley's full plan.

In the confusion the four other members of the gang escaped.

"Too bad," declared Varley. "We might have captured them as well as not."

"Never mind," cried Old King Brady. "They will come to the net later on. We have got the ringleader, and that is the main thing."

Handcuffs were slipped onto the wrists of Di Velasco.

Then Varley released him from the hypnotic spell. The audience was furious when he regained his senses.

He raved and cursed like a fiend, but this was of no avail.

The Bradys had no idea of trusting their prisoner out of sight. So they took him to the hotel and incarcerated him in a room next to their own.

The windows were barred, and the door firmly bolted.

The Bradys could hear every movement the prisoner would make.

The sensations of Stanley Small can well be imagined when the news was imparted to him.

He was like a man brought back from under the shadow of death.

He could once more draw a deep breath. He could feel free to venture abroad again.

"So it was Di Velasco after all," he muttered. "It was an old vendetta. Ah, I am lucky to see him in prison."

"You will see him in the Tombs in a few weeks," said Old King Brady. "I shall send for extradition papers."

"Do you think the oil gang will give us further trouble?" "I don't believe it."

"It is all very wonderful."

"Yes, but we owe nearly all to Mr. Varley. His hypnotic powers are a marvel."

"He shall be well rewarded."

"Not only have we got the full story from the villain's lips, but we have the names of the oil gang."

"That is fortunate."

"Indeed, I think so. We have now only to hunt them down."

"You will do that before you leave?"

"Yes, I think so; but one of us will need to stand guard over the prisoner."

"I shall be glad to assist you."

"Thank you! We may feel it necessary to call upon you."

The Bradys had reason to feel fully elated over the success of their stratagem.

They did not forget that they owed much to Varley, the magician.

The clever legerdemain artist made a good haul from his

show. More than this, Mr. Small placed a large-sized check in his hands.

Varley went on to the next town well repaid for his services.

The Bradys could now have started for New York with their prisoner.

But the desire to further add to their triumph by the capture of the oil gang prompted them to remain a while longer. And this led to further complications.

The detectives had the names of the four conspirators. They were bad men and noted toughs well known on the border.

It was these rascals who had tried to undermine the Giant Gusher.

Had not their plans failed the great oil tower would have fallen and many lives been lost in the destruction of the town.

This fact was reason enough in itself for the persistent tracking of the scoundrels. They deserved punishment.

So the Bradys could not deem the case finished until they had captured the oil gang.

So by turns they sallied forth in quest of their men.

For several days they worked blindly. Then there came a message which gave them a great start, and put them on a new line.

Thus it read:

"To the Bradys, Detectives:—This is to give you a tip. Get out of Beaumont as quick as you can. Velasco has friends, and they mean to rescue him. Keep your eyes open! Look out for fire. Yours, fraternally,

"A FRIEND."

The Bradys at first were disposed to attach little significance to this message; but the more Harry pondered over it the more impressed he became.

"Queer about that last sentence," he mused. "'Look out for fire!' What can it mean? What danger is there of fire?"

"I can think of none unless it is in this hotel," said Old King Brady.

"There is scant danger of that."

"Very little."

The Bradys, however, soon forgot the incident. The prisoner was generally sullen and moody.

But on this day his spirits seemed higher. He paced his room with elastic step.

The Bradys wondered a little at this change; but they gave little heed.

That night, just as they were about to retire, an uproar took place in the hotel. Through the hotel corridors came an awful cry:

"Fire! Fire!"

When the detectives opened their door smoke met them in a huge volume. Old King Brady saw a burning heap of oiled rags at the threshold.

He kicked these away and essayed to rush out into the corridor.



## CHAPTER XIII.

## A NEW TRAIL.

The old detective's first thought was of the prisoner. He must be looked after at any cost. The hotel had evidently been fired by incendiaries.

And in that moment, with the same realization, came the startling suspicion that the thing was a plot to rescue Di Velasco.

"Harry," cried Old King Brady, "the place has been set on fire. We must get Velasco out first of all."

"Yes," replied the young detective. "I am with you."

Together they rushed into the corridor. Just then scuffling feet sounded and burly forms rushed by the Bradys.

There was a sharp report, then another and another.

Bullets went crashing into the door, narrowly missing Old King Brady's head.

The old detective for a moment sprang back.

A complete realization dawned upon him. It was an attempt to rescue Di Velasco.

And, indeed, it looked like success.

Only for a moment did Old King Brady shrink back. Then he started for the corridor again.

Into the smoke he rushed, and reached the door of Velasco's room.

It was open.

All was smoke and darkness, but the old detective rushed into the room and began to feel his way about.

It did not require this, however, to tell him that the room was empty.

The bird had flown.

It was with deep chagrin that the old detective made this discovery; but he was resolved to overtake the escaping prisoner.

He should not escape without an effort at recapture.

Down the corridor he staggered, gasping for breath.

He heard Harry calling behind him.

"Come on, lad," he shouted. "I have found the stairs."

The next moment Harry was by his side. The stairs were before them, but choked with smoke.

However, the Bradys plunged down to the next floor. Here they were met by a wall of flame.

Old King Brady kicked open a door into a side room.

A draught of air lifted the smoke and gave them light. A moment more and they were at the window.

It was a light leap to the ground. They escaped injury.

An immense crowd surged about the burning hotel. People were caged in the place to be burned to death like rats in a trap.

It was a horrible thing. The detectives, however, knew that it was a calamity beyond their power to prevent.

They could think only of recapturing the man who had been responsible for all this trouble. They forced their way through the crowd.

A hand grasped Old King Brady's arm.

He looked up into the face of Stanley Small. The man's face was pale and fearful.

"Brady," he cried, "where is Velasco?"

"He has escaped."

"Escaped?"

"Yes. This is the work of his pals. They have liberated him."

"My God! This is awful! Can nothing be done?"

"Yes. We must overtake them while we can. They will not be far away."

"What can I do?"

"Help us. Call out armed men. Scour the town and country about. It must be done at once. It is our only hope."

"It shall be done."

"Don't forget what it means to you if Velasco is allowed to again go at large."

Small needed no hint. His face showed that he felt the gravity of the situation.

He rushed away to carry out Old King Brady's hints.

As for the detectives, they did all they could. They rushed through the crowd and made inquiries in quest of a clue.

But nobody could be found who had seen Velasco or any of his men.

It was a blind quest.

They disappeared as completely as if swallowed up by the earth. By this time Small had gathered some mount of men.

The town was scoured, and bodies of men were sent out across the prairie in every direction; but to no purpose.

No trace of Velasco could be found.

When morning came the quest was reluctantly abandoned.

The hotel was a heap of ruins. The town was in a state of great excitement.

The Bradys were much depressed. They saw all their work undone.

It was like beginning the case all over again.

Stanley Small was scarcely less depressed. To him the case meant much.

"I believe the fellow has the devil on his side," he declared. "It is almost impossible to bring him to justice."

"That is true," agreed Old King Brady. "But his time will come."

"You will not give up the quest?"

"No, indeed! We are going to see it through if it takes our lifetime."

"What line will you pursue?"

"Well," said Old King Brady, "that is hard to say. Nobody can say that the villains have left town. No trace of such a fact can be found."

"Then you think they may be in hiding in this place?"

"It may be so."

Small paced up and down nervously.

"I don't believe Velasco if caught could be carried away from here," he said.

"What do you mean?" asked Old King Brady.

"Why, he seems to have a legion of allies. They will



ing about this hotel just before the fire. Among them I  
v that old dame, Mother Bender."

Old King Brady gave a sharp cry.

"You did?"

"Yes."

"That is important."

"Is it?"

"Why, of course. It shows that she was concerned in the  
me. Also, it shows that it is possible Velasco has gone  
her place."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Small. "That is not a bad clew.  
hy not look there?"

"We will go out there at once."

It did not take long to procure horses. The Bradys start-  
for Mother Bender's. Small begged to go with them.

Out across the prairie they galloped.

It was not long before they came in sight of the hut  
Mother Bender.

As they drew rein before it the old woman hobbled out.  
She cast a keen glance at the Bradys.

It was plain that she recognized them at once.

Old King Brady fancied he saw a gleam of triumph in  
r eyes.

"Oh, ye're back again, eh?" she croaked. "Who do ye  
nt now? I suppose ye want to invade my house again?"

"We are after you this time, Mother Bender," said Old  
ng Brady, sternly.

She tapped the ground with her staff.

"Well," she snapped, "what do ye want with this old  
dy?"

"We want you to tell us all you know about the hotel  
e."

The old detective fixed a keen, searching glance upon the  
l dame.

He fancied he detected a slight tremor of her facial mus-  
es; but that was all. The same leering light was in her  
es.

"I don't know anything more than you do about it," she  
clared.

The old detective advanced a step.

"You were in town that night. You were seen in the  
cinity of the hotel."

"Was I?" she sneered. "Well, an' what can ye make out  
that?"

"Look here, my good woman," said the old detective,  
I'm not going to force a confession from you, but there is  
etty good evidence that you know all about that fire.

"Now, you know that the people of Beaumont are in an  
tly frame of mind. The feeling against you is strong.

"If they should come down here to root you out of your  
le and burn up your den, like enough hang you up to a  
camore, you'd be glad of a little protection."

This shot told.

Mother Bender's lip dropped, and a light of fear came  
o her eyes.

"I'm only an old woman," she whimpered. "I don't  
ow nothin' about it."

"Very well," said Old King Brady. "Confess and I'll  
see that no harm comes to you. If you don't—look out!"

The old detective turned to his horse.

The old dame was trembling violently.

Before Old King Brady could mount she cried queru-  
lously:

"Hold on! Ye say ye'll keep 'em off, and ye won't let 'em  
hurt me?"

"I gave you that promise."

"Then I'll tell ye all I know."

She hobbled nearer. Then she pointed to the west with  
her staff.

"Ye'll find Black Jack Mead and the whole gang over  
on Wilson's Butte. It's twenty miles. They've got a cave  
there. They set fire to the hotel, an' it was to rescue Velasco.  
Now I've told ye all."

"Mother Bender," cried Old King Brady, "is that the  
truth?"

"I swear it by the saints."

"That is enough."

"Now will ye keep yer word?"

"Yes."

"An' ye'll keep the devils away from my place? I want  
to live here in peace."

"I'll do more than that. If we find the villains at the  
place you name I will pay you a rich reward."

The old crone muttered something under her breath.  
Then she turned and went into her cabin.

Old King Brady turned to his companions.

"Come," he cried. "Now we'll trap the wolves in their  
den."

"Wait!" cried Small.

"What?"

"There are five or six of them. We are not equal in num-  
bers."

"Oh, that's all right," cried Old King Brady. "We will  
stop at Cooley's Ranch and perhaps get reinforcements  
there."

They now galloped away across the prairie.

It was twelve miles to Cooley's.

Two hours later they drew rein in the ranch yard. The  
genial ranchman came out to meet them.

"Ah, gentlemen," he cried. "I am glad to see you. I  
hear you have caught the rascal who is responsible for all  
the trouble at Beaumont."

"You mean Velasco?"

"Yes."

"We caught him," agreed Old King Brady; "but he  
has slipped the leash."

"What do you mean?"

"Have you not heard of the hotel fire?"

"Fire? No! That is news to me."

"Well, the hotel has been burned. In the excitement our  
man escaped."

Cooley whistled softly.

"That is hard luck," he said; "but what do you intend  
to do out this way?"

"We are on the track of the gang."



"Did they come this way?"

"Yes. Do you know a place called, I think, Wilson's Butte?"

"It is eight miles west of here."

"Well, we have information that they are there. It seems to be a rendezvous."

Cooley shaded his eyes, and gazed westward. Then he said:

"Now I know what it means. Our boys reported seeing some strangers riding that way early this morning."

#### CHAPTER XIV.

##### AT THE BUTTE.

"No doubt it was the gang," cried Old King Brady. "Were they identified?"

"No, I think not. But there were six of them in all."

"It was them. Now, we must plan to entrap them."

"That ought to be easy; but will ye take a bit of advice from me?" asked Cooley.

"What?"

"Don't go near there in daylight."

"Oh, no! We will not do that. In fact, we shall use all due caution."

"They will fight."

"Of course they will."

"I think you can surround the place after dark and bag them all."

"Just so. Now, in order to get force enough to do that we will have to go back to Beaumont."

"No, ye won't," cried Cooley. "I've got twenty men here just aching for the job. They'd rather fight than eat."

"Do you mean that?"

"Of course I do."

"We will pay for their services."

"No, you won't. It is as much for my interest as anybody's that they shall be wiped out. They are a curse to Texas."

"Mr. Cooley," said Old King Brady, warmly, "you are all right."

"I try to be."

"Now, we will stay here until nightfall."

"Ye're welcome! Come right in and make yourself at home."

The Bradys were royally entertained at the ranch that afternoon. Cooley proved a most genial host.

When evening came the ranchman called his men into the yard.

"Boys," he addressed them, "there is a gang of dirty coyotes in a hole out at Wilson's Butte. The chap that burned the hotel at Beaumont is one of 'em."

"Now, it'll be a risky job, and I don't want ye to take the chance if ye don't want to, but I want twenty men to go out there with us and wipe 'em out."

This was enough.

A great yell went up. The cowboys cheered wildly. Rough men that they were, nothing could suit them better than an adventure of this kind.

Ponies were saddled and equipments got ready.

It was to be a quick ride by night. The party was swinging in a line around the butte, and then close in. The rest would depend upon events.

They were in the saddle at nine o'clock.

The night was propitious, for the moon was obscured by clouds.

On they galloped. The miles sped away rapidly under the swift feet of the tireless ponies.

After an hour had passed directly ahead was seen an object against the sky.

It towered to a height of nearly a thousand feet. This is no more remarkable feature of the western prairie than the butte.

Rising abrupt and rough against the sky from the level of the floor-like plain, the contrast is great.

Wilson's Butte was a high elevation.

From its summit a wide view of the plain could be had. Its substance was a sort of calcareous rock, which Nature had cut up into caverns and passages.

It had once been a watch tower and stronghold of the Apaches.

The cowboys first surrounded the butte. Then they began to close in.

No sign of life was seen about the butte. If the laws were there they kept well out of sight.

However, the Bradys were not to be deceived.

Cooley gave the orders to lie low in the prairie grass and wait. Then he said:

"Mr. Brady, I would suggest that you and I try a little scouting trip. Are you agreeable?"

"I am," said the old detective. "You can depend upon me for anything."

Cooley led the way through the tall grass on foot.

The Bradys kept close behind him.

The big ranchman knew every foot of the region. He was right at home.

When within a short distance of the butte, he paused and whispered:

"Now we'll have to play Injun. You can do that?"

"We know the ways of the Indian," declared Old King Brady.

"Good! Then let us go ahead."

Cooley dropped into the grass and crept forward on hands and knees. With the utmost caution they kept on.

Presently they reached the base of the great elevation.

They listened intently. Then Cooley led the way up the slope.

The ranchman kept on until they were well up on the side of the butte.

Then he paused.

"Now," he said, in a whisper, "we are quite safe. We can make our way along the side of the butte until we find some entrance to the cavernous interior."



"Is it your belief that we shall find them inside the cave?"

"I have that idea."

The detectives followed Cooley until they had made their way fully a hundred yards along the side of the butte.

Then Old King Brady stopped.

"Wait," he said.

"What is the matter?" asked Cooley.

"I hear something."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Then you have better ears than I."

The old detective stooped and pressed his ear to the ground. He listened intently for some moments.

"You are right," he declared. "They are inside the cave."

"You can hear them?"

"Yes."

"You are a wonder!" declared the ranchman. "I am deaf of hearing, but I can detect nothing."

Old King Brady had taken a course up the side of the butte.

Suddenly he paused.

Before them was a dark orifice in the lime rock. A dim glimmer of light was to be seen.

The three men stood quite still for some moments. They knew that they had reached the den of the oil gang.

The coast seemed clear.

It would be foolish to say that they were not somewhat excited. Old King Brady whispered:

"If you will wait here I will venture into that place and see what is going on."

"Wait?" exclaimed Cooley. "No, that is my job."

"Well, if you care to venture, we will both go; but perhaps it would be well for Harry to remain here, so that he could give the alarm if we should get into trouble."

"I will stay here," said Harry.

So Cooley and Old King Brady glided into the cavern.

Once in its arch they could hear the sound of voices.

In a few moments they had reached a bend in the cavern.

Then a remarkable spectacle burst upon their view.

About a fire of coal sat a half dozen men. One was Don Enrique himself.

The others were the members of the gang of incendiaries and oil workers. They were smoking and conversing.

But in their position Old King Brady and Cooley could hear every word spoken.

"That's one thing about it," said a strapping big ruffian, in a savage voice. "We've run our necks into a noose, and we've got nothin' out of it."

"That's right, Lew Wilkins," declared a ruffian at his elbow.

The keen, black eyes of Di Velasco snapped in a fiery way.

"It's your own fault," he said hotly. "I'm not to blame. You should have wiped out those accursed detectives."

"We couldn't," declared Wilkins.

"Why?"

"They were too slippery. Then, again, we didn't know they were detectives."

"You're blind fools! Caramba! You have no right to claim anything."

"Jest as I thought!" bellowed Wilkins. "Ye're goin' ter back out of it. Ye mean to cheat us out of our money."

"You fools! How am I going to give you money when I have none?"

"Ye lie! Ye have thousands in a New York bank. Ye can't deny it. Haven't ye been buyin' up oil stock fer months past?"

"That's it, you idiot! I've lost it!"

The oil gang dropped oaths. Then Wilkins said again:

"Your game won't work, my little bantam Mexican. You'll shell out five thousand apiece, as ye agreed, or we'll cut yer heart out."

A sullen roar of approval went up.

The Spaniard's face darkened.

His eyes gleamed with a strange, lurid light. His lip curled.

"So you threaten me," he said, with a soft laugh. "Lots of good it will do you to cut my heart out. You will be likely to get your money then."

"I don't keer if we don't! We'll have satisfaction, anyway."

"I'll tell ye what, Greaser," said a big, broad-shouldered oil man, "we've done the square thing by ye. Ye know that well. Now we want ye to do it by us."

"Have I refused?"

"Why don't ye do it?"

"Why, I tell you you must wait. I'm not out of the woods yet. All my money is in New York. I can't give it to you until I can get it."

"That's all right," declared Wilkins. "We'll go down to New York with ye."

"That we will."

"No, you won't," said Velasco, with a ringing snap of his white teeth.

"Why not?" asked Wilkins.

"You fellows are not such fools. Do you know the result?"

"What?"

"You would be caught up like flies on a trap. Detectives would spot you in a moment."

"Why not you?"

"It will be easier for me to conceal my identity."

At this Lew Wilkins laughed scornfully.

"Then ye'll go on there in disguise?" he asked sneeringly.

"I shall."

At this all the ruffians laughed jeeringly. The Spaniard's hand went stealthily to his bosom. He was silent.

Wilkins, who acted as if he had been drinking, seemed in a specially ugly mood. He glared at the Spaniard a moment.

Then acting upon impulse he edged over nearer to him.

He thrust his leering face into that of the Mexican's and said:



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